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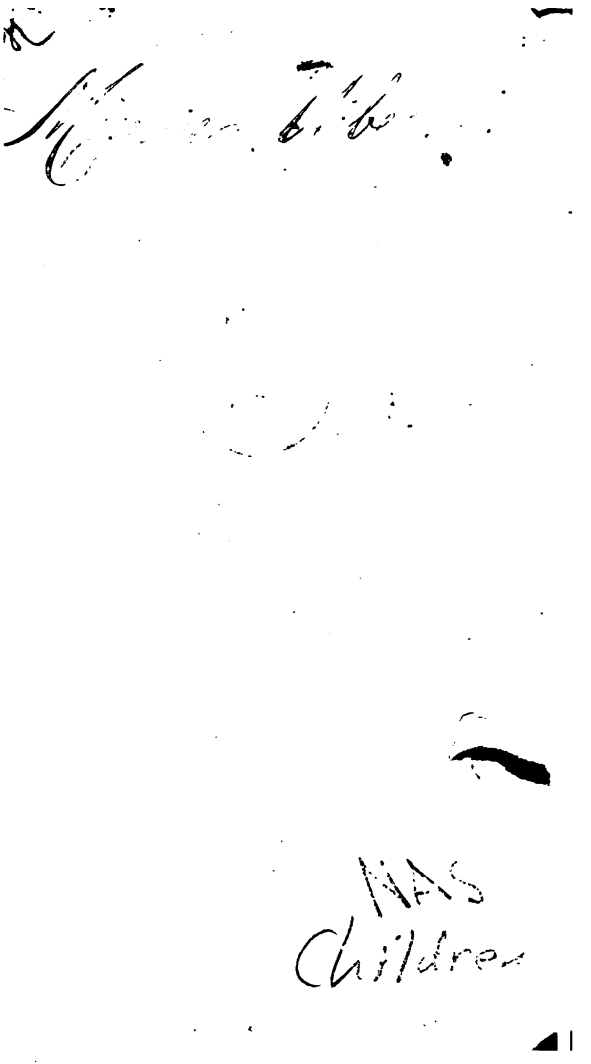
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Frontispiece.

"IT'S GONE, GEORGE!"—P. 8.

# THE CHILDREN OF OAKFORD FARM.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"HARRY'S BATTLES," "MY SISTER PATIENCE," Etc.

"A member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of Heaven."—*The Church Catechism.*

PUBLISHED BY THE

PROTESTANT EPISCOPAL SOCIETY FOR THE PROMOTION OF EVANGELICAL KNOWLEDGE,

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APR 1905
TRANSFERRED FROM C. A.

THE

# CHILDREN OF OAKFORD FARM.

## CHAPTER I.

### THE WHITE ROSE.

IT was dinner-time at the farm on the hill. You might have known that from the sudden quiet outside the house. The children, who had been playing on the grass-plot in front of the door, had gone in at the sound of their mother's call; and old Hero, the dog, lay sleeping undisturbed in the pleasant sunshine. The bees were journeying from flower to flower with their loads of honey, gathering from tall hollyhocks, from a border full of pinks and wall-flowers, rosemary and stocks, from the jessamine that twined about the rustic porch, and from the roses that peeped in at the casement windows; but their busy hum was the only sound to be heard about the farm,

in the fields around, or in the valley below, except the chatter of the brook, and the occasional bleating of a flock of sheep which fed in Long Meadow. It was Sunday; and as one stood in that old-fashioned garden, with its clipped yew-trees, and its quaint flower-borders, and looked out over the quiet pasture-land beyond, toward the little village half hidden by trees, and the tall church spire which rose up amongst them, a feeling of peace and calm would unconsciously steal into one's heart, and God would be thanked for the day of rest which He has given to man.

The family party, consisting of Farmer Heathfield, his wife, and four children, were gathered round the table in the farmhouse parlor. On other days they had dinner in the kitchen; but Sunday was the exception, and the privilege was valued accordingly.

"Mother," said Rhoda, the second girl, "Mrs. Lester is to be in the school this afternoon: Mr. Lester said so this morning."

"I saw her in church," said the bright-faced boy opposite to her.

"Now, George, you couldn't do that," remarked Mary, who sat beside him; "you know you couldn't from where you sat."

"I did, I tell you; I saw her bonnet above the pew."

"Ha! ha! George," laughed his father; "so

seeing a lady's bonnet is the same as seeing herself;" and his sisters joined in the laugh.

George reddened with vexation; for the trial he was least able to bear was being laughed at; and he turned angrily to his sister:

"Well, Miss Polly, you seem to think it very funny; but I can't say I know what you are laughing at."

It was now Mary's turn to be angry—she hated to be called "Miss Polly," and George only did it to tease her.

"We are laughing at your stupidity, to be sure," she said, scornfully; "and you think yourself so sharp and clever."

"Sharper than you, any way," retorted George; but suddenly raising his eyes, he met those of Rhoda fixed earnestly upon him, and there was a grave wistful look in them, which made him silent immediately.

"Mother, we had such a beautiful class with Mr. Lester, this morning," said Rhoda. George knew why she said it, and the color of shame deepened in his cheeks.

"Had you, my dear? What was it about?"

"He's explaining the Catechism, you know, mother; and first he makes us say it all through, and then he gives us a lesson on one little bit."

"Well, I should hope all *my* children knew

their Catechism," said good Mrs. Heathfield, a little self-complacently. "I don't see much good in the parson teaching them *that*."

"Yes, mother," said George, "we *do* know the words."

"And what more do you want?" asked Edwin, the eldest boy.

"To know what it means, and what good it can do us," replied little Rhoda, earnestly. A contemptuous look across Edwin's face, but he said nothing; and his father looked kindly over to Rhoda, and said:

"Well, my lass, and what did you hear about?"

"About being 'members of Christ,'" answered Rhoda, hesitatingly.

"*I'll* tell you, father," said Mary, who was always ready enough to talk. "Mr. Lester asked if we knew what members meant, and nobody did but Rhoda, and then he told us that our arms, and legs, and feet, and hands, and fingers were all members of our bodies, and then that Christ's people are joined to Him, just in the same way, all making one body, and He is the Head; and then he asked us—he asked us—oh! I forget." It was evident that some unpleasant recollection crossed Mary's mind, and prevented her from going on.

"He asked us," said Rhoda, very slowly, and as if the question had sunk deeply into

her heart, "if we were living as members of Christ ought to live."

"What business is that of his?" said Edwin, suddenly looking up.

"He did not tell us to answer the question to him, but to take it home and think about it."

"And how are we to know, my dear?" said her father, gravely. "It seems now to me that only the Almighty Himself can answer that question."

"No, father, we can answer it."

"Well now, I should like just to hear if the parson has made you understand that. Come, Rhoda, *you* are to answer me."

Rhoda hesitated for a moment, for she seldom spoke on these subjects; but seeing that her father's eyes were fixed on her, as if expecting an answer, she said quietly:

"He told us that we should know, if we wanted our hands to do something, and they did not do it, that there was something wrong with them, because they did not obey our will; and so, just in the same way, we may know if we are living as members of Christ, by watching if we obey *His* Spirit, instead of carrying out our own wills. Wasn't that it, George?"

"Yes," replied her brother, thoughtfully. "And then he told us how members of Christ *ought* to live, and bade us look out all the texts we could about it by next Sunday; and

then, mother, he told us that Mrs. Lester was coming to the school this afternoon."

"And I'm going to carry my beautiful white rose to her, mother," said Rhoda, joyfully. "Won't it be lovely for a bride?"

"Indeed it will," replied her mother. "Mind you're in time, children. I should like Mrs. Lester to think well of you."

"Yes, mother; now I'm off to get my rose;" and the whole party was soon dispersed.

George alone remained in the parlor, leaning his arms on the window-sill, and looking out through the casement. His mind was full of what the clergyman had been saying, and he began turning over the leaves of his Bible to look for the texts which he wanted.

Suddenly Rhoda burst into the room. "It's gone, George—oh! it's gone; my own beautiful flower! What shall I do? what shall I do?"

"Your rose gone? oh! I am sorry," he said heartily, as he turned round. "When did you see it last?"

"This morning, before church," replied his sister, sobbing.

"Would Edwin know about it?"

"No! he says he doesn't. I met him in the garden."

"Poor Rhoda!"

"It is so vexing—oh! George."

"It is, indeed. I'm so sorry."

Just then Mary came in: a blush rose-bud, a clove-pink, and some sprigs of jessamine were in her hand.

"Isn't that pretty? Why, what's the matter?"

"Somebody has stolen her white rose," said George.

"Oh! what a pity; well, never mind—don't cry; get some pinks and stocks, there's lots of them," and down in Mary's heart there was a secret feeling of pleasure, that her nosegay would be so much better than her sister's; though, if any one had said so to her, she would have denied it.

Rhoda felt hers to be poor comfort, and she turned again to George.

"If I could only catch the persons who have done this, what should I do to them?"

"You would forgive them, Rhoda."

"No, I shouldn't; I should tell of them before the whole school, that's what I should do."

George left the room, and returned in a minute or two with some roses and pinks tied up.

"There, Rhoda, that is better than nothing."

"Yes, thank you;" but Rhoda took them with a very downcast look.

"Come, we must set off," said Mary, taking up her Bible and hymn-book; and her brother and sister slowly followed her.

They walked on in silence for some minutes, and George hardly knew what else to say to comfort poor little Rhoda; but before he could think, she was looking up brightly in his face and saying:

"George, here's exactly what Mr. Lester was speaking of this morning; there's a vexing feeling deep down in my heart, that Mary should have prettier flowers for the lady-bride than I have, and I'm angry with whoever took my rose, and I oughtn't to be that—it's pleasing my own wicked self, and that's all about it."

George felt relieved from a great weight, and they went on merrily.

"Did you see the little boy with the crutch that was in the class this morning, George? his eyes were full of big tears, once or twice."

"That was Alfred Wilson—a horrid little animal he is, too. His father has gone to the infirmary at Grindon, and he's living along with the Davises; they're his cousins."

"Why is he horrid, George?"

"Oh! when we play rounders on the green, he sits there moping; and if any one speaks to him, he puts his finger in his eye and begins to pipe."

'Poor little fellow!"

"Oh! he's as cross as can be, and looks as sullen as a—"

"Don't, George," said Rhoda, rather reproachfully.

"Well, I won't. Here's the school—and look; there's Mary fanning out her dress, and making herself look grand for Mr. Lester's lady."

"Oh! but George, look, do look, there is Mr. Lester himself and the lady coming down the road; let us hold the gate open."

Several children were gathered in a knot around the gate, as the clergyman and his wife approached.

Mrs. Lester was a bride, and had only just come to the pretty rectory of Oakford. This was her first appearance at the school, and had been the subject of anxious expectation amongst the children.

She was young and very beautiful; but there was a greater charm than that of beauty in her sweet smile and gentle voice; for they told of a kind and sympathizing heart within. George took off his cap as he held the gate open, and Rhoda made a curtsey.

"Thank you," said Mrs. Lester, giving George a smile all for himself. "Who is that?" she asked, looking up into her husband's face.

"George Heathfield; and that is Rhoda next to him; she and Mary, her elder sister, will be in your class, and George is in mine. Here is the school;" and Mr. Lester led the way in.

"We have only one room," he remarked, as the children rose simultaneously on their entrance. "The boys are at one end, and the girls at the other."

Mrs. Lester sat down amongst the girls of the first class, and soon began to make friends with them. Mary and Rhoda Heathfield were in their places in a moment, and Mary eagerly stretched out her flowers.

"Are these for me?" said Mrs. Lester, taking them with her most lovely smile. "Thank you, my child; I am fond of roses — this blushing bud is beautiful; and how prettily they are tied up."

Rhoda shyly held out hers. George had had not tied them up very well, and they did not look nearly as nice as Mary's; but the little girl tried very hard to keep down the feeling of envy in her heart, when Mrs. Lester put them aside with only a "Thank you," said very sweetly indeed, but still showing evidently that she did not admire them much.

"Never mind," thought little Rhoda, "it is like the text we found this morning, 'whether one member be honored, all the members

rejoice with it;' and I must try to be glad that Mary's flowers are better liked than mine: it is not my fault that my beautiful rose is gone." And the dark cloud of envy went away, and sunshine, the bright sunshine of peace and love, shone in her heart, and beamed out in her face. She did not know that a greater trial of her strength was coming.

"Are you all here?" asked Mrs. Lester, looking round the class.

"Yes, ma'am, all but Jessie Davis; and she is always late," answered one.

"I'm sorry for that."

"Here she is, please, ma'am," said Mary Heathfield.

Jessie Davis came slowly towards her place. She was a tall girl, and much older than Mary and Rhoda, but she was dressed in dirty finery, and looked a sad object, as she stood beside them in their neat print dresses, white capes, and clean, simple straw bonnets. She had lately come with her father and brothers to live in a small cottage, at a very short distance from Oakford Farm; bnt formerly she had lived at Grindon, a large town in the neighborhood.

Rhoda raised her eyes for a moment from her Bible as Jessie came to her place, and instead of looking away again they remained fixed upon her; it was not because Jessie

had tawdry red and yellow flowers in her bonnet, and a dirty feather twisted round the outside of it—not because her shoes were slipshod, her stockings in holes, her once smart dress was in rags, and her grand muslin scarf would have been the better for washing and mending—not because her tangled hair fell in untidy ringlets over her dirty face, and her hands were grimy and black, that Rhoda's attention was fixed on her so earnestly—but because one of those grimy hands held her beautiful white rose! There was no mistaking it, for Rhoda had watched every petal unfolding and every leaf coming out. The burning color mounted to her cheeks and the tears to her eyes. She thought of her angry words a little while before: would not it be a famous punishment for Jessie if she were to proclaim her a thief before the whole class? She rose to do so; and then, suddenly, it seemed to come back to her—that name, that title which she had been given! Was it Christ's Holy Spirit that was telling her to call Jessie a thief, or her own wicked will? Was this acting like a member of Christ? No; she knew it was not. What did it signify who gave the rose to Mrs. Lester, so long as she had it? and then a silent prayer rose up from the little girl's heart, and sitting down again, she

clasped her hands, and did not look up until she heard Jessie say, "Please, ma'am, here's a rose!"

Mrs. Lester took it, and said, as she did so, "How very lovely! I don't think I ever saw anything more beautiful. Did this grow in your own garden, Jessie?"

"No, ma'am.'

"How did you get it?"

Jessie hesitated for a moment, but then said, boldly, "Some one gave it to my brother, and he gave it to me; and all the girls were bringing some flowers for you, so I brought this."

"Thank you, very much. I shall have quite a treat with all your flowers." And Mrs. Lester thought to herself, "This girl must have some good points, or she would not have done this;" and little Rhoda thought, "I am glad I did not call her a thief all at once, because it may have been her brother."

Just then Mary bent forward and whispered to her, "Rhoda, that flower is quite as pretty as the one you've lost."

"Hush!" said her sister, laying her finger on her lips—and then school began.

After it was over, Rhoda spoke to Jessie, and said very gently, "That flower that you gave to Mrs. Lester was mine."

"It wasn't," replied Jessie, angrily.

"I know it was. I knew it by a mark on one of the leaves."

"Be quiet, and don't tell lies of me," said Jessie. "Because you hadn't anything so pretty to bring yourself, you were jealous of me."

"No, Jessie, that is not true; because I could have spoken out before the whole class, and you would have had to confess then."

"I should not," said Jessie; "so you'd best be quiet, or I'll make you!"—and she raised her hand threateningly.

Rhoda shrunk away and joined her brother, who had just come out.

"So Jessie Davis stole your rose?" he said, as they set out on their homeward walk.

"I don't know if she did," replied Rhoda.

"I saw your face, as she gave it to Mrs. Lester."

"Did you?"

"Yes; and I knew what you were thinking about."

"What was it?"

"Our lesson this morning," replied George, in a low voice.

"Yes, George."

"And I thought how pleased Mr. Lester would have been, if he had known it all."

Rhoda did not answer, but the thought that was in her heart was, "I wonder if the

Lord Jesus is pleased with me; He saw it all, and knew how hard it was."

They had soon reached the top of the hill, and George and Mary went in directly; but Rhoda stood for a few moments leaning against the garden-gate, looking out over the quiet scene below. There was a deep joy in her heart, and the peacefulness of everything around her seemed to increase it.

"Oh! I do love Him," she thought; "He has given me so much, and I have given Him nothing. I wonder if I'm really His own child—'a member of Christ'? I should like to be a useful member, and do some work for Him. How beautiful it is this evening! how the sunlight is pouring down upon the valley! I should like to be like the sun, brightening up everything, and everybody, I came near. There are the birds going home to their nests—what a flight! I wish George would come for a walk; it is just the evening to go down by the brook, and home through the copse:" and she raised her voice, and cried out, "George!"

He came directly.

"Will you come for a walk?"

"Yes, to be sure; that's a good thought."

"We shall just have time, before tea and evening service, for a short one about the fields."

"Come along; don't wait for Mary—I don't want her to come!"

"Oh! George, if she likes it though, is it kind?"

"I don't know."

"Mary, would you like to come?" said Rhoda, running to the window.

"No, I don't want to dirty my best frock."

"There now," said George, laughingly, "what a very good thing new frocks are sometimes."

## CHAPTER II.

### ALFRED'S COMFORTER.

WHAT makes you so late, Jessie? I tell ye, girl, I won't have you hanging about after school's over; you shouldn't go one step if it was not for the promise I made to her that's gone. Precious little good it does you, that I can see. Now, none of those faces, or I'll make you feel my hand." Such was the greeting which met Jessie Davis, as she entered her wretched home.

She answered only with a rude laugh.

"Where have you been, I say?" reiterated her father, angrily.

"About my own affairs," she replied, saucily, as she brushed past him to put her shabby bonnet away in the cupboard.

"Impudence!" said her father, giving her a blow with the back of his hand.

Jessie began to cry.

"Hold your noise, and get the tea!"

"I don't see why I shouldn't have my own pleasure as well as you," she muttered.

"Get the tea, I say," was her father's angry reply; and she moved slowly into the inner room which served for their kitchen. She expected to find the fire out, and no water to be had; but, to her surprise, there was a nice clear fire, and the kettle was singing merrily. On a low wooden settle in the chimney-corner sat a little boy, with a book in his hand, and a crutch lying beside him. He lifted his eyes for a moment as she entered; they were large and dark, and contrasted peculiarly with the ashy paleness of his sunken cheeks and the marble white of his forehead, round which his dark brown hair clustered in a heavy mass. It was but for an instant that he looked at Jessie, and then his eyes returned to his book.

"That's a good chap, Alfred, to have the kettle ready," said Jessie, bustling up to the cupboard. "Such a row and worry as father's kicking up; I hope the tea may scald him, I do."

"Oh, Jessie, don't speak like that; he is your very own father."

"What do I care!"

"That's not honoring him."

"Be quiet! I don't want none of your preaching," she said, quickly, and then hurried out of the room with the tea-things. Alfred remained, quietly looking at his book,

but he could not see the words, for large tears dimmed his eyes, and fell one by one upon the page. "I ought not to have said it; I wish I hadn't; and yet it was only because I'd been thinking so much; that was why; it's very hard." But then Alfred thought of something that dried his tears, and, when tea was ready, he went into the next room with his usually quiet face.

His cousins, Will and Ben, had come in, and Jessie was pouring the tea into some half-washed and much-cracked cups, while her father cut some bread.

"Well, Jess, was the parson's lady at the school?" said Will, with his mouth full of bread-and-treacle.

"Ay, was she?" said Ben, winking at his sister.

"Yes, to be sure, she was."

"What did she look like?"

"Well, if it hadn't just been for her face, you couldn't have told her from anybody else."

"It doesn't take two to tell that, Jess," laughed Will.

"I mean her dress, Will; she wasn't one bit like the squire's lady. She'd just a muslin dress, and a black silk cape, and a bonnet with white ribbon, and a bit of lilac inside."

"As if I cared what she had on. She was welcome to wear the Queen's crown, for aught I cared," retorted Will. "But you'd best keep in with her, Jess, that the parson may speak a good word for us when the squire appoints another chap to be at the Hall."

"What did she say to the rose, Jessie?" said Ben.

"She liked it very much; and only think what that set-up Heathfield girl said."

"Well, what?" said Ben, laughing.

"Why, that the rose was hers!"

"And she wasn't so far wrong, either," replied her brother, chuckling to himself.

"Was it, Ben?"

"Well, I won't say; but it grew in Farmer Heathfield's garden once upon a time."

"And how did you come by it?"

"When the cat's away, the mice play."

"Was it at church-time?"

"Ay."

"Oh, Ben; how could you?" burst from Alfred's lips.

"How could I *what*, parson?" said the boy, looking round with a saucy stare at his cousin.

"*Steal*," said Alfred, indignantly.

"Go it, little one!" cried Will, while Ben

struck him on the face with the back of his hand. The blow drew a cry of pain from Alfred, and his uncle looked up from the newspaper he was reading.

"Always whimpering, you young cur; be off out of this; I'll have none of your whining here."

Alfred rose, laid down his slice of bread, and, taking his cap from behind the door, limped out of the house. He cared not where he went—anywhere, anywhere—so that he might be free from his cousins. On through the muddy lane, near the dirty cottage; on to the high-road; on over a stile that led to the bright meadows, which were glowing with clover and buttercups; along the footpath, which wound through them, until at length he reached the brook. He could limp but slowly; however, he did manage to get to this spot, and then, weary and angry, he threw himself on to the mossy bank which sloped down to the water.

A wise and clever man has said, in one of his books, "Make intimate friends with all the brooks in your neighborhood:" and it is very good advice.

Alfred had done so with the little winding stream that ran through the Oakford meadows; and it was about the best friend he had. He was never weary of sitting on that

bank, and watching the water dancing on over the pebbles, carrying small twigs and pieces of straw on its tiny ripples, washing round the little green headlands of the banks that sloped into it, filling the shallow bays; bathing the roots of the water-plants; hurrying over the green willow-boughs that bent into it; sometimes hiding itself under some shady hedge, and then bursting out again with a merry gurgle, and reflecting every bright sunbeam that shone on its sparkling waters.

But, on this evening, the poor little lame boy gave no thought to the murmur of the stream, or the bright light that danced on it; he was too miserable to think of anything but his troubles; and no sooner did he find himself alone, and in quiet, than he broke out wildly:

"Father, father! I want you, oh! so much; get well quick, oh! do. Oh! if God is so good, so great, and loves us so much, why doesn't He make father well? Why did He make me lame and so ugly, and let that cruel lot laugh at me and make fun?"

He paused, for his sobs choked him; but, in a moment or two, there came again that bitter, heart-wringing cry, "Father, father!" and the lonely little boy laid his head down again on the grassy bank, and cried. Sud-

denly a soft, gentle voice sounded by his side:

"Where is your father? Can I call him for you, or run and fetch him?"

Alfred looked up. Surely he knew that kind little face, and had seen those pitying eyes bent on him before? Yes, of course; it was the little girl who had answered about the Catechism so well in the morning! How he had wondered what her name was, and where she lived, and whether she had a kind loving father to take care of her; he knew she must be happy, because her face looked it; and it quite lit up, and beamed with joy when she answered questions.

"What is the matter? please tell me," said the little girl again.

"Who are you?" asked Alfred, brushing his hand over his eyes to put away the tears which he was ashamed she should see.

"I'm Rhoda Heathfield, and live up at the farm, and I saw you in the class this morning."

"Yes."

"Did you see me?"

"Yes."

"Isn't your name Alfred Wilson? George (that's my brother, the boy with the rosy cheeks) told me that you lived along with the Davises."

"Yes."

"And why were you calling your father? I thought George said he was in the hospital at Grindon."

'So he is."

"Is he better?"

"I don't know; they don't tell *me*." And the little boy's lip quivered as he tugged away at a root of grass, until he got it up.

"Why are you grieving so?" said Rhoda, her own eyes filling with tears of sympathy.

"I'm not; I'm only angry." And Alfred flung the grass as far as he could into the water.

"Perhaps your father will be better soon."

"Yes."

There was a long silence, for Rhoda did not know what to say next; and Alfred was shy and quiet.

At last Rhoda said, "George is gone to look for some cuckoo-flowers for me, and I said I would stay here till he came back; you don't mind, do you?"

"No."

And then something came into Rhoda's heart which she wanted very much to say, but she did not know how; but as Alfred did not speak, she said, at last, "You know I've a right to be sorry for you."

Alfred looked up with a stare of amazement. "Why, you don't belong to me, any way?"

"Yes, I do."

"How?"

Rhoda hesitated for one moment; but her heart was full, so she spoke out: "Mr. Lester told us this morning about being 'members of Christ.' And so you see we must be something to each other."

"I've been puzzling over that this whole afternoon," said Alfred, looking up quickly. "How do you mean?"

"Why, don't you see, if this left hand of mine had something the matter with it—say, I'd burnt it—the right hand would try to do it good, because, as Mr. Lester said, it was a member of the same body. I should do every thing for it with this hand that was all right."

"Yes," said the little boy, more brightly.

"Here's George; don't cry any more; I must go!" And Rhoda ran off, having, in her own simple way, comforted and strengthened one very weak member of the glorious Body to which she belonged; for Alfred rose from the side of the stream with a lightened heart, and went home to meet his dreary lot with a feeling that some one felt with him, and was sorry for his troubles.

## CHAPTER III.

### RHODA BRINGS SUNSHINE INTO A DARK PLACE.

RHODA was full of resolutions during the next week, for trying to live in the remembrance of her high calling. It was hard work at first to keep down the angry rough word, or the sharp reply, because one who was a "member of Christ" should be meek; to put away the sulky pout, or the impatient frown, because "members of Christ" should show the joy of their glorious title, by having happy cheerful faces; to watch for little opportunities of helping, comforting, or rejoicing with others, because members of the same body "should rejoice and suffer with each other." All this was hard, but little Rhoda knew where to look for help.

She had seen Alfred every day, and tried to make friends with him, and by degrees his shyness was overcome, and he learnt to look upon Rhoda as his friend and comforter.

On Friday afternoon, when she was coming up the hill from school, she was astonished

by feeling some one pulling her cape, as she passed Davis's cottage; and on looking round, she saw Ben.

There was a broad grin on his face, and he began abruptly: "How did Mrs. Lester like that rose I sent her?"

Rhoda colored deeply, but did not answer.

"Pretty flower, wasn't it?" said Ben.

"I can't stop to talk," replied the little girl, hastily.

"Oh! don't you imagine you're going so quick as all that comes to," said Ben, putting himself in front of her, and stretching his arms out to prevent her passing.

Rhoda began to tremble with fear; she dreaded what this great rough boy might be going to do.

"Now, what shall I do to you for calling my sister bad names?" said Ben, with a chuckle of pleasure as he saw the color fading away from her cheeks.

"I didn't," faltered Rhoda.

"Yes, you said she was a thief."

"No, I only said that that rose was mine."

"Well, another time please to remember that other folks can get pretty things as well as yourself."

Rhoda was silent.

"I could make you cry in a minute," said Ben, triumphantly.

The tears were in Rhoda's eyes, so she could not deny this fact.

"Now," said Ben, "I've got something more to say."

"Oh! please let me pass," said Rhoda, in a choking voice.

"Wait awhile, my dainty miss; now look here, what do you do when a cur keeps up a whining for something it wants?"

"I don't care about your dogs," said Rhoda.

Ben went on as if he had not heard her.

"We generally beats 'em till they leave off."

"I want to go home," repeated Rhoda.

"And if beating won't do—" continued Ben.

"Then give them what they want, and let me go home," said Rhoda, desperately.

"Exactly so," said Ben, coolly; "and that's what we've got to do. There's that chap Alfred, to-day, is so bad with his side, he can't stir, and he keeps saying he must walk to the gate to see you, and he can't get so far; and so he's been fretting and crying, and making such a fuss, that I was obliged to come myself; and now go in and stop his whining, do; for of all the meowing cats I ever set eyes on, he's the worst." And Ben went whistling down the lane, while Rhoda stood hesitating as to what she should do.

Inclination said "Go home," and that high thought that filled her heart said, "There is

a suffering *member* to be comforted in that cottage, and can you be happy while you feel that he is in pain and you might help him, but will not?"

Rhoda was knocking at the door the next moment, and Alfred's voice, feeble with pain, was telling her to come in.

The little boy was sitting on a low settle by the kitchen fire, his face haggard with suffering, his hair clustering over his forehead, the contractions of which showed the pain he was enduring; tear-stains marked his cheeks, which were sunken and wan, and his crutch lay unheeded by his side.

"Oh, Rhoda!"

The little girl had crept softly to him.

"This is one of my bad days," he whispered.

"Is the pain very bad?"

"Yes."

"You wanted me?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

Alfred looked rather puzzled at this question. For the last four days he had watched eagerly for Rhoda to return from school, and it had almost become natural to him to look forward to this as his one treat in the day. She did not know how fast her sympathy was working its way into his lonely heart.

After thinking for a moment, he answered slowly, "Because you speak so kindly, and no one else does that to me."

So Rhoda sat down beside him on the settle and told him about the school, and the games of play she had had, and how she had seen a stray donkey put in the pound on her way home, and some rabbits in Ferney Copse, and how she was to have such a great treat the next day, for father was going to drive her over in the gig to Grindon market, and then she was to see grandmother; and she added some suggestions about bringing some sweeties and gingerbread home to Alfred; and the little lame boy listened quietly, when the pain allowed him, and lifted his large wondering eyes to Rhoda's merry face, and seemed cheered by the very sight of it.

"What do you do on these days?" asked the little comforter, suddenly pausing in her flow of word-pictures.

"Not much."

"Does that mean nothing?"

"No; to-day I tried to look out those texts, and then to whittle a stick, and then to make a mouse-trap. I liked the text best, but I couldn't find what I wanted."

"What was it?"

"Well, don't you know, Mr. Lester said something about the comfort it was to those

who had anything the matter with them, to know that there was a text about the members that would do for them, and he was sure some of us would have found it by next Sunday; and I want to find it, but I can't."

"I think I've got it," said Rhoda, joyfully; "at least, not I, but Mary, my sister, because she's so much cleverer than I am."

"Well?" inquired Alfred, looking up anxiously.

"'But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased Him,'" replied Rhoda, slowly and distinctly.

"But I don't know what that means."

"Well, I'm not quite sure; but I think it's to comfort you for being lame. Don't you remember, you said yesterday how it made you feel so useless because you could never do any good, and you didn't see why God had made you a cripple? and I think this just tells you—'it hath pleased Him.' I can't tell you very clearly, but that's it, I think; and that would make it easier to bear, wouldn't it?"

"Yes."

"Now, I must go—good-bye, Alfred; I'll try to bring you some fairings."

She had nearly reached the door when a sudden thought seized her, and, turning back,

she said hesitatingly, "Alfred, do you ever think, when the pain's so bad, that because you're a member of Christ, He feels it all, and knows how bad it is?"

It was God who sent that message of comfort through little Rhoda's lips to the lame boy, and that it *was* comfort could have been told from the tone in which he answered.

"I'll remember that. Good-night. Now I'll try again at the mouse-trap."

And while Rhoda that night was lost in dreams of the delights of Grindon fair, Alfred was turning restlessly round and round upon his pillow, and murmuring to himself, "A member of Christ; then He feels it all, and knows how bad it is!" until sleep came to him towards morning, and for a short time he forgot the weary hours of pain which he had been trying to endure patiently, for the sake of Him who had borne so much greater suffering, that he might "enter into rest."

## CHAPTER IV.

### MARKET-DAY AT GRINDON.

THE next morning Alfred awoke much freer from pain, and with a lighter heart than usual. The sun was shining brightly; Uncle Davis and Jessie were in better humor, the boys had set off early for Grindon fair, and things altogether wore a more cheerful aspect. When the early breakfast was over, Alfred went into the garden (if garden it could be called, which contained a few straggling wall-flowers and marigolds, and a large quantity of weeds), and stood leaning against the gate until he felt its rusty hinges giving way, when he changed his position, and sat down on a heap of stones and cabbage-stalks which was close to it, his eyes fixed eagerly in the direction of Oakford Farm. He hoped to see Rhoda setting out with her father.

There were a great many carts and vehicles of all descriptions on the Grindon road, and it was rather amusing to watch them passing by in quick succession, sometimes being old-

fashioned and odd, and matched with some comfortable-looking, old-fashioned farmer and his wife, who slowly jogged on in it, looking upon Grindon market as a pure matter of business. Sometimes it was a newly-painted gig, or a light cart, full of laughing faces, merry jokers, and gaily-colored shawls and bonnets. Everybody, it seemed to Alfred, was going to Grindon that day.

But presently there came a foot-passenger along the road—a tall, thin man, who looked enfeebled with bad health, and carried a small bundle tied up in a blue-spotted handkerchief, which hung on the end of a stick; and as he walked Alfred noticed that once or twice he tottered; but still he came on and on, and in the direction of the cottage too.

Soon he reached the gate, and then paused, looking wonderingly around; his hand was on the latch, and Alfred rose.

"Halloa, you're the chap I want," said the stranger at once. "Lame, ain't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, Afred Wilson's your name, I'm thinking?"

"Yes."

'I'm just out of Grindon Hospital, and I've brought a message from your father to you."

Alfred's hands were clasped in eagerness.

"Oh! how is he?"

"My poor little chap, he's but badly," was the reply, in a kind, friendly tone. "He bade me say so to you, and that he wants to see you."

Alfred's face grew rigid and pale. He rarely showed emotion of any kind before strangers, and it was in a voice of forced calmness that he said, while looking searchingly in the stranger's face, "Is father dying, sir?"

"Well, my lad, I fear so."

One long, half-suppressed groan burst from Alfred, and the man said kindly, "Come, my boy, you mustn't fret; he may live some time yet."

"I will go now. Can I get admittance today?"

"Yes, this afternoon."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, my lad. I only hope you may ever be as good a man as your father. Good morning to you; keep up a heart, lad; there's nothing like a brave heart to meet troubles with. It's astonishing how it does turn the edge of them, as you may say. Tell your father John Jackson gave his message."

Alfred held out his hand, which the stranger shook warmly, and then turned

on his way, while Alfred hastily entered the house. Jessie was lazily washing, or pretending to wash, the breakfast-things, and his uncle had gone out.

"Why, what's the matter, Alfred?" said his cousin.

"Father's dying. I'm going to Grindon!" was all Alfred could say.

"Going to Grindon! and you pretending to be so bad yesterday, you couldn't stir?"

"I'm better to-day," he replied hurriedly, as he poured some cold water into a basin on the table, and began washing his face.

"Uncle Wilson won't die, never fear," said Jessie; "people never die when they're expected to."

Alfred did not answer, but flung away the towel he had used, and left the house. The summer sun was becoming hotter and hotter every moment, and there was a weary walk of three miles before him; his heart sank at the prospect, for he could only walk with the greatest difficulty. But "father was dying!" this one thought seemed burnt into his brain, and gave him strength he had never known before. He got into the hot, dusty road, and, keeping to the footpath, went on as quickly as he could; every step was pain, and before he got to the first milestone his strength was nearly gone. Still he kept on, pausing for a

moment now and then, to still the aching pain in his side, and then limping a few steps further. The sun struck down upon him with an intense power, and he became faint and dizzy.

And now the first milestone was in sight, and with a great effort he dragged himself up to it. "Grindon, 2 miles," he read, and the words brought despair: he could not do it. He threw himself down on the little bit of grass where the milestone stood, and, leaning his head against it, burst into a flood of tears. "Father will die," he groaned—"will die—will die, and I shall not see him. Oh! if I could but see him just once—just once."

Two tramps were coming along the road, evidently on their way to the town. One had a bundle of umbrellas at his back, and the other a knapsack.

"Halloa, Crutchy," said one, as he came up, "what's the matter?"

Alfred was rather frightened, and did not answer.

"What's up?" said the other man, in a gay but rough tone.

"I can't walk," said Alfred, trying to brush away his tears.

"Then run it, cripple!" said the first speaker.

"Or hop it, if you like it better," put in the other.

"I'd rather carry this lot of umbrellas than you."

"I'll carry you for a shilling a mile," said the man with the knapsack.

"Come, mate, we can't stop dawdling here;" and they passed on.

Then there came a gig containing a farmer, his wife, and a little child sitting between them. The child pointed towards the lame boy who was leaning against the milestone, and a pitying smile crossed the happy face of the farmer's wife, as she threw a penny to him, and they quickly drove out of sight.

Alfred rose and tried to stagger on for a few steps, but it was useless; he could hardly stand, much less walk; and once more he burst into bitter tears.

Again the sound of wheels was on the road, and Alfred looked up; this time his eyes rested on a familiar face, for the gig contained little happy Rhoda and her father, as well as several large baskets and hampers. The little girl's face was beaming with pleasure, and her father looked almost equally pleased, to have her perched on the high seat beside him. Rhoda's merry voice was plainly to be heard chattering about

the delights of the fair; but when her eyes lighted on Alfred, the happy chatter ceased, and she said, earnestly, "Oh, father, stop one little minute; I want to speak to Alfred."

The good-natured father instantly pulled up his horse, and the little girl clambered down the side of the gig.

"Alfred, what *is* the matter? What brings you here? How could you get so far?"

"I walked—but oh, Rhoda!"—and there was almost the wildness of despair in his voice.

Rhoda was frightened, as she looked at his ashy face, and saw his hands clasped tightly, tightly together, as if to keep him from crying out loudly.

"What is it, dear Alfred?" she whispered, as she threw her arm round him.

"Father's dying, and I can't get to see him."

"You mean you can't walk?"

"Yes."

Rhoda ran to the side of the gig. "Father, can't we take him? His father's dying, and he must see him."

"Well, my lass, I'm afraid we've not got room; you see these baskets of cheese and the vegetables and fruit for grandmother take up such a lot of room. I'm very sorry, my dear, but there isn't room." Rhoda's face fell.

"But, father?"

"Well, my dear?"

"Alfred *must* go!"

"There isn't room for another in the gig, my dear."

There was one short struggle in Rhoda's mind: and then she said, with a quivering lip, but in a brave voice, "Father, I'll stop behind; I'd rather Alfred went in my place."

"Nonsense, my dear."

"No, dear father, I mean it; please say yes."

"Of course you may do as you like, Rhoda; and if this little chap's father is dying, it seems bad he shouldn't see him."

"Thank you, dear father. Now, Alfred, you get up in my place."

"But, Rhoda! I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry you're in such trouble; but you *must* go, Alfred. There, can I help you? and, father, you'll bring him back, won't you?"

"Yes, my dear, bless your kind little heart."

"Thank you, Rhoda, thank you, so much," said Alfred, drying his tearful eyes. "I'll tell father, and he will bless you too."

"Make haste home, little woman," said her father, shaking the reins; and then with a cheery "Gee-up, Taffy," he set off, leaving

little Rhoda standing by the milestone, and wistfully gazing after them. When they were fairly out of sight, she sat down and cried. She thought it was because she was so sorry for Alfred; but a little bit of regret for the delights of Grindon fair was mingled in her tears, though down in her heart there was a glad feeling of having done right; and soon she set out on her homeward walk, over the hot dusty road, along which poor Alfred had toiled a little while before.

## CHAPTER V.

### "OUR FATHER, WHICH ART IN HEAVEN."

"THAT'S the bed, my little man; you'll find father very ill," said a good-natured nurse, as she led Alfred along the sick-ward in Grindon Infirmary. "Now, be quiet; don't excite him."

The sick man opened his eyes, at the sound of the voices, and a radiant look of joy came over his sunken features as he saw his son standing by him. Eagerly he stretched out one of his thin wasted hands. "Alfred, my boy, how did you get here?"

"Farmer Heathfield gave me a lift," replied the little boy quietly.

"You've just come in time," whispered his father—"just in time to see me."

"Oh! father, father, don't go! don't leave me!" cried Alfred, clasping the cold hand he held so tightly that his father could not withdraw it.

"Alfred, my boy, my boy. Oh! it is hard!" said the dying man, faintly.

"I cannot live when you are gone, father; I can't, indeed."

"Hush, Alfred, boy; this won't do! Here, my little lad, put your head down on my pillow."

Alfred obeyed.

"There is a word in my heart that makes me strong to bear leaving you behind, Alfred; it's this: 'Leave thy fatherless children to Me.' It's God Almighty says that, lad."

Alfred's only answer was a groan.

"For myself, boy, I'm glad to go. I know, bad as I am, my Saviour has loved me well; I've given my heart to Him, and He'll keep it safe."

"But, father, who'll love me? Who'll care for me?"

"He that has said He will, my boy."

Alfred shuddered.

"My little lad, you must not make this last talk all sad," whispered his father, laying his hand on the wet cheek beside him. "I'm going to mother and the little ones; and you'll come in the Lord's own time."

"But no one will love me," sobbed Alfred.

"'When my father and my mother forsake me, the Lord taketh me up,'" said his father, solemnly. "My boy, I've heard it said, God has a special care of the orphans, because they've no father but Him."

"How long, father?"

"Do you mean how long am I to live?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps till to-morrow; and then I'm to go to the Saviour."

There was a long silence, only broken by Alfred's smothered sobs.

"My little boy, you'll love the Saviour too, won't you? None can ever know how He has loved us."

"I'll try," whispered Alfred.

Again all was quiet, and the father, exhausted with speaking, was silent for some time. Presently he stretched out his hand to feel for Alfred's—it had fallen by his side; and hastily looking round, he saw that the little boy was fast asleep, tired out with the excitement of his grief and his walk. Gently the father passed his thin fingers over the clustering curls of brown hair which shaded the cripple's face, and which had been his mother's pride. It was a strange sight: the boy in the sleep, from which his waking was to be only to sorrow, and loneliness, and pain; the father preparing for the long, long sleep, from which the waking was to be glorious and joyful.

Death was near, but the Saviour who loved him was nearer still; and in this thought David Wilson rested, with peace.

At length, the nurse stepped to the side of the bed: "It's time for visitors to go."

David Wilson laid his hand on Alfred's cheek, and in an instant the boy started up.

"You must go, my boy."

"Go!"

"Yes, Alfred; all go now, and you must."

"And leave *you* alone?"

"I am not alone," said his father, while a smile of perfect peace passed over his face.

"Come here, close to me, little man, that I may kiss you."

Alfred felt in a dream, as his father held him closely in his arms and whispered a prayer over him, that God, the Father, would bless him, and take care of the little desolate boy, for His holy Son's sake.

"And now, my child, good-night," whispered his father; "it's a long good-night, Alfred."

Closer and closer the little fellow clung to him, till the nurse came, and tried to draw him away. Then one wild, bitter cry ran through the room. "Father! father! Oh! *don't* die!"

"Hush! my boy; there's sick folk here, and you'll make them worse. You must go now, Alfred."

"Kiss me again, father."

Once more the lips, on which the cold

chill of death was already gathering, were pressed to the cheek of the little boy, while his father whispered tenderly, "God will take care of you, my little lad." And then Alfred left his father's side; and as he limped along the corridor, down the wide stone steps, and through the long hall, till he reached the great door, and found himself on the steps outside of it, he felt that he was indeed alone. The great door closed; and as he heard the bolts slip into their places, he knew that he was an orphan already, for he was shut out from the only one he had left in the world to love him.

He sat down on the steps to wait for Farmer Heathfield's gig; and many a one cast a pitying glance on the little lame boy, who was crying so bitterly at the Infirmary gate. It was not long before the farmer came up, kindly helped him into his place, and then drove home quickly.

That night, while little Alfred was sleeping heavily, after the troubles of the day, the angels came to take his father to the Saviour whom he loved, and the home where there could be no more parting, sorrow, or pain.

It was Mr. Lester who broke the news to the orphan boy, and it was well that it was not done by a less tender hand; for if comfort had not been given to him speedily,

Alfred's feeble frame would have given way under the wildness of his sorrow.

But the clergyman knew the grief he had to deal with; he understood, and made the boy know that he understood, the full bitterness of the trial that he wished to comfort him in; and so Alfred was ready to listen to his strengthening and consoling words, and to feel that they came from one who could sympathize, as well as counsel. Mr. Lester reminded him of the lesson of the previous Sunday, assuring him that the members of Christ were not left to suffer alone; but that their Head, even the Lord Jesus, suffered with them in every trouble, knew the exact amount of trial which fell to the share of each, and in "all their afflictions was afflicted with them."

"And then, Alfred," he added, before he left him, "think of the lesson which comes for to-day. Remember, you are not only a 'member of Christ,' but the 'child of God:' not fatherless, while you have such a Father in Heaven; not uncared-for and unloved, while you are His child. Do you not believe that He loves His children better than any one else can? and that He will only let good happen to them?"

These words, bringing so forcibly to him his loneliness and orphanhood, made poor

Alfred quite break down again; and he buried his face in his hands, unable to control his sobs. Mr. Lester laid his hand upon the bowed head, and said, gently, "My poor boy, it is a bitter, bitter trial; but there is One who has said, 'I will not leave you comfortless; I will come to you.' Remember your high calling, Alfred—'a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of Heaven.'"

## CHAPTER VI.

### A BOY WANTED AT THE HALL.

ONE morning, a few weeks after these events, Mr. Lester wended his way up the hill, and through the shady lane which led to Farmer Heathfield's house. He did not walk up the garden-path to the door, but, seeing the farmer himself in the Long Meadow, he opened the great gate, and went over the grass to him.

"Good morning, Mr. Heathfield. What glorious weather it is for your hay; and how famously you are getting it in!"

"Yes, sir, I am. There's an old saying, and a good one for every man to remember—'Make hay while the sun shines.' Yes, sir; it's not bad of its kind—that hay isn't."

"The crops look well altogether," said the clergyman, looking round about him on the fields and pasture-land which surrounded the farmer's dwelling.

"They do, sir."

"You've cause to be thankful, Mr. Heathfield."

"Yes, sir—I have so, every way. Things are prosperous enough. Now, sir, look at that corn-field—there's a sight; and my cattle, they say, beats any around; and my wife's dairy is getting famed in these parts."

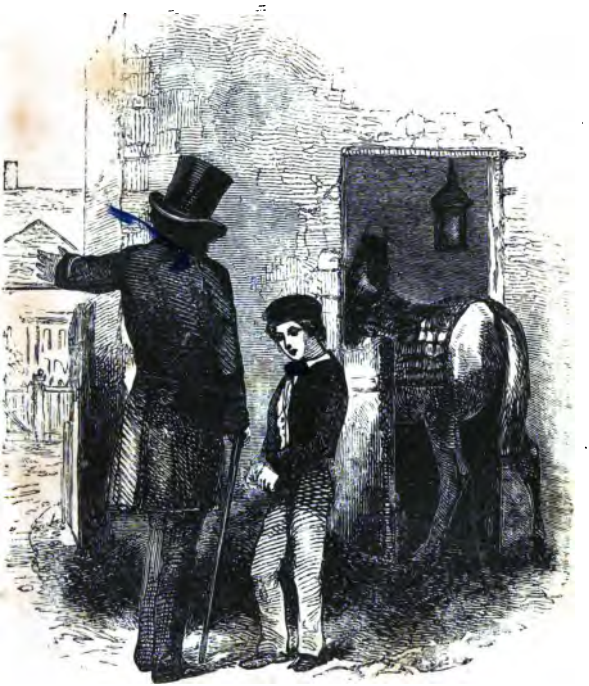
"I'm glad, indeed, to hear it; but, Mr. Heathfield, I've come this morning to give you a new cause for thankfulness; and for that reason may I ask you to come with me for a few minutes to the school?"

"Surely, sir," said the farmer, dragging his neckcloth into its proper place, turning down the cuffs of his coat, and putting his hat straight upon his head, while his honest face beamed with satisfaction and pleasure; and they set off without delay.

All the children were assembled at lessons; but there was a sudden hush of voices, and lull of perfect silence, when Mr. Lester and Farmer Heathfield entered the room, except that little Rhoda could not help saying, "Oh, there's father!"

Mr. Lester spoke to the master, and then took his place at the desk, with a smile on his face that showed he had some pleasant news to communicate.

He said a few kind words to all of them, and then added, "And now, I have a com-



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mission from our good squire to fulfil; and that is, to ask Mr. Whitby whom he considers the boy best fitted to take a place at the Hall. Mr. Lionel Harwood is just coming home, and the squire wants a boy who can fetch the horses round; be ready to help the coachman; or, in fact, do any thing that he is told to do. I know this is a situation you are all eager to get—I can see it in the anxious faces which are looking at me; but, you know, only one can have it, and Mr. Whitby and I both agree in thinking that the boy who best deserves the place is George Heathfield."

Poor George! he was too much surprised to see the faces about him. He did not see his father's look of pride, nor Rhoda and Mary's flush of delight, nor the angry and envious glances of Will and Ben Davis, and even of his own brother Edwin, who had felt himself certain of the place. No; George had never for a moment dreamed of this honor—for honor the boys of Oakford did esteem it, knowing that those who got employed at the Hall were always pretty sure to get on in life afterwards, if they kept steady, honest, and industrious. How pleased his father and Rhoda must be; and what *would* mother say?—and then for a moment he did look up, and showed his burning cheeks, and met the kind

glance of Mr. Lester, his father's smile, and Rhoda's loving look of delight. It was the happiest minute of his life. And then, when school was over, and he could spring to his father's side, and when Mr. Lester shook hands with him, and gave him a note to take to the squire the next day, he seemed to begin to realize his good fortune; so that when his mother had heard the good news, and kissed him proudly—looking into his happy face with one scarcely less so than his own—he could not help saying, "I do think there never was any one in such luck before."

The next day seemed very long to Rhoda, as the morning hours wore away, and she lingered by the gate to be the first to hear George's account of his interview with the squire.

But at last he came, with a merry, bounding step and joyous whistle, which changed to a shout of glee as he caught sight of his sister.

"Well, George?" she cried anxiously.

"It's all right—I'm to go next week."

"Do tell me all about it: I ran quick back from school, to see you the first."

"I can't tell, till I tell mother. She'll be so pleased. Oh! Rhoda, I saw the squire himself; and Mr. Lionel is such a grand young gentleman, and so kind and nice."

Rhoda laughed; and they went together

into the house. They found their father smoking his pipe in the kitchen, and their mother with him, very busy in covering some jam-pots which were ranged in long rows on the table before her.

"Well, my lad?" said his father, shaking the ashes out of his pipe against the hob.

"Well, father, I'm the squire's boy; and what do you think he said?"

"What, boy?—something that's made you look uncommon bright, any way," said his mother.

"Yes; when he heard my name he said, 'I think I need hardly ask your character. To be your father's son is a character in itself; and I hope you'll be worthy of the name of Heathfield.'"

The father looked up well pleased.

"Ay, lad, the squire has always been partial to us Heathfields; and his father and grandfather before him."

"Yes," continued his wife, "it isn't many, George, that have got such a good start in life as you have; and I think I'd break my heart if I fancied you'd ever disgrace your father's name."

Oh! how strong and brave George felt at that moment—longing to begin life that very instant, and feeling quite certain that his "father's name" would be safe in his keep-

ing. While his thoughts were thus occupied, little Rhoda was standing at her father's side, thinking gladly of George's prospects—proudly of her father's good name—and then more gravely of another name which she and George bore, for the honor of which she longed to remind him that he must even be more anxious than about father's.

It was a glorious day in the beginning of August, and a half-holiday; and when dinner was over, Rhoda proposed to George that they should have a good long ramble. He gladly assented; and they were not long in setting off. George was so full of his prospects, that he could talk of nothing else; and Rhoda was a most willing and interested listener; and so they went on merrily through the waving corn-fields, over the green hill-side, across the common, where the breeze blew refreshingly, and brought upon it the scent of the flowery hedgerows; until at last they reached the entrance to the squire's woods; and then Rhoda's delight was at its full height.

The summer sun slanted in through the long green branches of the thickly-planted trees, and tinged their trunks with a mellow, golden light; the mossy ground beneath them was soft and cool-looking; the wild honeysuckle twined around them, and flung its

graceful blossoms over the stumps of gnarled oaks, or hung in festoons across the path; large ferns grew in rich profusion in all directions, and the clusters of nuts were already beginning to form on the hazel-trees; while a gurgling, pleasant sound, which mingled with the song of the birds, and the rustling of the leaves, told that there was water near at hand. Yes; just a few steps to the right; and if we had bent down, we should have seen the merry little stream rushing through the hollow, with its tiny waterfalls, its clear ripples, and its margin of moss and ferns.

Was it any wonder that the children chose this for their holiday-walk?

And no sooner had they reached this lovely spot, than a woodland spirit seemed to enter into them, and the old oaks and elms rang again with their merry shouts. Rhoda rushed to her favorite stream, and plunged both hands into the cold sparkling water; while George cleared it at one bound, and gave chase to a rabbit on the other side. Then Rhoda missed him, and had to get over the stream as she best could by herself, that she might look for him; and her questioning shout was answered from above her head, where, looking up, she spied George's merry face peeping at her from the midst of the

clustering green leaves of the tree he had climbed.

But after a while, when they had shouted, and laughed, and run about, and chased rabbits, and hunted for ripe nuts, which they could not find, until they were tired, Rhoda sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree, which had lain on the ground so long that it had become overgrown with moss, and ivy, and ferns. George pulled out his knife, and began cutting his name on the bark, and Rhoda twisted the honeysuckle which he had brought her with the fern-leaves which grew close to her hand, and made fantastical wreaths of them.

But her thoughts were full of something else; and by degrees the flowers fell from her hand, and she sat silently watching George's busy fingers.

He had got as far as the first E in Heathfield, and was looking at his handiwork with some satisfaction.

"It looks well—doesn't it, Rhoda?"

"Yes, very. George, I wonder how you'll like it."

"Like what?"

"Why, the work, when you come downright to do it."

"Very much, I'm certain."

"And if you get into scrapes and troubles,

and those things, do you think you'll like it all the same?"

"I suppose so; but, Rhoda, why should I get into scrapes?"

"Oh, I thought all boys did," said Rhoda, innocently.

George laughed. "Well, Rhoda, I think father's good name will help to keep me straight;—so I'll remember that."

Rhoda looked up brightly. "Yes, George; and then there's something else—I don't know exactly how to say it, and yet I do want to say it so badly."

"Well, what is it?" said George, looking round at her, and pausing in the last stroke of his name.

"Why, there's another name—a better one than you've got—that will help you more than father's;" and the child colored very much, and hesitated.

"What do you mean?" said her brother, who had not caught her meaning in the least.

Rhoda bent her head lower and lower over the flowers in her lap, and did not speak for a moment. Then, in a very gentle, humble voice, she answered:

"You're older than I am, George. I don't want to preach—only about father's name reminded me of that other name we were

called that Mr. Lester said we ought to be so careful of—'children of God.'"

George's merry face became grave directly.

"Yes, Rhoda, you're right—quite right; and I hadn't thought of that; and you mean that it will help more to keep me in the right way, to remember that I'm called by that name than by father's?"

"Yes," answered his sister. "I try to think about it always; and then, when I want to do naughty things, I sometimes say to myself—I'm called one of the children of God; and His children must not get angry, or be lazy, or tell lies; and then it seems to help me. But you must know all this quite well, Georgy!"

"You're a good little thing!" said George, springing to his feet. "Now let's go home. I say—look at that rabbit, quick! look there; away it goes—oh, Rhoda, you're too late: there's its white scutty tail just popping into a hole."

It was nearly tea-time when they reached the farmhouse, for they paused a few minutes at the gate of Davis's cottage, to speak to Alfred, who was leaning against the paling, and looked very weary and downcast.

"I'm so glad to hear of your good luck, George," he said, warmly, while a smile lit up

his face. "I know others aren't, but *I* think you deserve it well."

"Will and Ben don't like it, I know," said George.

"No; they say you're a hypocrite. But it's not only them—Edwin isn't any better pleased; and when I said I was glad, I got knocked over the head for it."

"Poor Alfred," said Rhoda, sympathisingly.

"They're not too kind to you," said George. "I wonder you don't run away, old boy!"

"I couldn't do *that*, if I was to try," said Alfred, mournfully; "and besides," he added, "it wouldn't be right, when I've been put here to bear it."

George did not understand him; but Rhoda knew that he was thinking of that loving Father who for His children chose the home on earth, where they would receive the training that would best prepare them for His home in Heaven, though that training might be painful enough to them sometimes.

"Well, I wish you had not such a hard time of it," said George, kindly; "or, at any rate, that you were not alone to bear it."

"I'm not alone," said Alfred, darting a bright look at Rhoda; and then the brother and sister went on, while the cripple remained gazing thoughtfully over the quiet scene around him; and, then, as he watched

his friends ascending the grassy hill, and turning in at the gate of their happy home, a saddened look crept over his face, as he remembered his own lonely lot ; but it quickly gave place to a smile with Heaven's peace in it, as he whispered to himself, "I am not alone, for the Father is with me."

## CHAPTER VII.

### "NEVER PUT OFF TILL TO-MORROW WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO-DAY."

GEORGE was soon settled in his new employment, and liked it even better than he expected. For the first year, it was arranged that he was to come home at night to sleep, and then, if he went on steadily, he was to become the young squire's page. Every evening Rhoda used to watch for him longingly at the garden gate, to be the first to hear his accounts of the day.

One evening in September, when the shadows were beginning to fall, and the night was coming on, she waited longer than usual for his return. She heard the sound of merry voices coming up from the village-green, but she did not think George was there, for he had promised to come back early.

At last, she heard his step bounding up the hill, though it was almost too dark to see him.

"Oh! George, how late you are! What has kept you?"

"I've been having a game on the green."

"Oh! George, you promised to be back in time."

"Well, you needn't be cross, Rhoda! I must have some play sometimes. Don't you know the proverb about—

"'All work, and no play,
Makes Jack a dull boy?'"

"You could have played with me, George, instead of those horrid Davis boys, as I expect you've been doing."

"Well, Rhoda, you're very glumpy. Edwin was there too, and he's playing still; but I came home because I thought you wanted me."

Rhoda did not answer; she was not very well pleased; and she thought George was not sorry enough for having disappointed her. But, just as they were entering the house, he said:

"I declare, Rhoda, you might be a little less pettish; it isn't like you; and I've actually got Edwin to do a message for me, that I might come back earlier to you."

"You've come too late for us to work in our garden, and that's what I wanted," answered Rhoda, rather mournfully.

"Well, I'm very sorry; I'll get up early to-morrow morning and do that—no! I can't, though, for I've got some money to take for Mr. Lionel to Joseph Nash's forge, at Highbank. Do you know, Rhoda, he told me to-night, that he knew he could trust me? and he gave me half a crown to pay Joseph Nash, and three-and-sixpence for old William Brooks. Edwin took that, because I hadn't time to do it to-night; and the old man wants his money."

"I wonder would Mr. Lionel have trusted you, if he knew that you gave his errands to some one else to do?" said Rhoda, rather scornfully.

"Rhoda, I declare I won't talk to you," said George, hastily, getting, at last, most thoroughly provoked.

"You're not kind," said Rhoda, indignantly.

"No more are you," replied George; and then they went into the house.

"Why, children, how late you are!" said their mother, looking up from the pile of grey stockings she was darning.

Rhoda said nothing, but took down her school-books, drew her chair in to the table, and set hard to work to learn her lessons for the next day: at least, apparently, for, in reality, she was wondering what was the

matter with George, and what could make him so unkind. And then a reproachful voice sounded in her heart, "Have you been kind? Did you try to be so to him?" And she was obliged to answer, "No." "Oh!" she thought, sorrowfully, "when shall I be gentle and humble and loving? When shall I feel that I am one single bit like what a child of God ought to be?"

George, meanwhile, was talking to his father about Grindon fair; for the large yearly one was to be held on the next day but one, and the farmer had an attack of gout, and was unable to go.

"Edwin's such a harum-scarum, or I'd trust him by himself. I don't know what to make of that lad," said the father, thoughtfully; "he'll never do any good, while he leads this idle life."

"Here he comes," said Mary, suddenly raising her head from the lesson she was learning; and in another moment Edwin came in. He looked flushed and excited, but he was not very ready to talk.

"Where have you been, Ned?" said his father.

"Here, there, and everywhere," he answered, carelessly.

"I'll tell thee what, lad; this life you're leading won't do. Now, look there, at

George; he's going on steadily and industriously, doing credit to his name, and doing his duty in that state of life, and all the rest of it; but you, lazy boy, you just do nothing but lounge about with those Davis boys, and I won't have it. Why don't you copy your brother?"

A look of hatred passed over Edwin's face, and his heart was full of Cain-like thoughts, because he knew his brother was better than himself.

"Now," said the farmer, going on rather testily, for his temper was tried, partly by his son's laziness and partly by the gout—"now, if I could trust you, I'd let you go to Grindon fair for me. I used to do it for my father long before I was your age, but I know you'd get into mischief; so mind my words, you are not to show your face there."

Edwin gave a careless glance of defiance towards his father, but did not speak. Dark and wicked thoughts of rebellion were in his heart, and he was not trying to check them. Yes, and worse thoughts even than those were present with him—thoughts of malice and envy towards poor George, that had been lurking there for many weeks, which had been fanned by his bad companions, and were now ready to burst forth in wicked

devices. Oh! Edwin, Edwin, pause before it is too late; this night may be your last chance—stop! Put away the thoughts of evil which fill your mind; cry to God for strength in this dark hour of need. He can help; He is willing to do so; though the temptation is strong, His grace is stronger. Stop, stop while there is time.

But Edwin did *not* stop; he had taken the first step in his horrid design against poor George that evening, and now he was reckless and determined to go on.

He soon went up to bed, and before long George followed him.

"Edwin," he said, as soon as they were alone, "did you pay that money? I was afraid father wouldn't be pleased if I let out that I hadn't done it myself."

"Yes, to be sure I paid it," said Edwin, turning his face round to the wall, and pretending to be sleepy.

"Three-and-sixpence?" asked George.

"Yes, of course."

"Well, I must go over to the forge at Highbank to-morrow morning; I've half a crown to pay there. By the bye, I hope I have got it all right;" and George thrust his hand into his pocket. No half-crown was there! He felt again—no, it was useless!

"Edwin, oh! Edwin—I've lost it! What shall I do?"

"Bother! you'll find it somewhere," grumbled Edwin from under the bed clothes.

"I must have dropped it," said George, in horror. "Edwin, what do you think?—where *shall* I look?"

"Wherever you think you've dropped it," said Edwin. "But don't plague a fellow when he's going to sleep."

George thought he might have been more sympathising, but he never expected much from Edwin, so he made up his mind what he would do himself. "It was in the garden I must have dropped it, when I was talking to Mr. Jones," he thought; "I'll go there as soon as it's light and look, if I lay awake all night. I remember now—I didn't feel it in my pocket when I gave Edwin that other money. Oh, dear! it's a bad business. Well, I mustn't forget to say my prayers;"—and George knelt down reverently, and told all his troubles to his Father in Heaven, and asked Him to help him in them: and that Father's ear was open to the prayer of His child.

For some time George lay awake with the full purpose of remaining so until the morning, but at last sleep came with a resistless force, and his heavy eyelids closed. Once,

before he fairly went off, he was partly roused by hearing something that sounded very like a sob, coming from Edwin by his side; but when he spoke to him no answer came, so he concluded that he had been mistaken, and went to sleep.

With the first dawn of light he opened his eyes; but he was rather astonished to see Edwin's place empty, and his clothes gone.

"How early he is," he thought; "I'm sure it can't be much more than five o'clock, if it's that; and I wonder he didn't wake me in getting up. Well, I'll be off now to look for that money; oh! I *hope* I shall find it;"—and it was with a very much soberer face than he usually wore that George dressed himself and went downstairs.

He stole out of the house very quietly, for he did not want his mother to ask him why he was going so early; and he heard her step in the dairy.

Though it was September, the weather was rather chilly at that early time in the morning; but George ran so fast that he did not notice it, and before long he had reached the squire's garden. But now there rose a difficulty: How was he to get in? for the door was locked, and the gardener kept the key. Never mind; there was one corner of the wall that he knew he could get over

easily, and, accordingly, he did so; and in another moment was busily searching for the lost money. But, alas! alas! his searching was all in vain; for no half-crown was to be found. How he wished that he had done his errands the evening before, and not gone to play; but it was too late now, for the mischief was done.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### WHO IS THE THIEF?

"I'LL go and look under the peach-trees," said George to himself. "I was talking to the gardener there, after Mr. Lionel gave it to me, and I may have dropped it then." He was rather astonished to hear the sound of voices as he came near the spot. "How early Mr. Jones is at work," he thought to himself. "Well, he is a kind man; I'll tell him my trouble, and get him to help me." But his astonishment changed to horror when he saw just before him, busily engaged in filling a large bag with peaches, Will and Ben Davis, and his own brother Edwin. In a moment the half-crown was forgotten, and he sprang to Edwin's side. "What are you doing?" he said, eagerly. "Edwin, Edwin, those don't belong to you!"

Edwin started, and a guilty look of terror stole over his face. "George! what brings you here?"

"I've come to look for that money."

"Oh! yes, very fine," laughed Will Davis. "I'll engage you came to get the peaches yourself, in spite of your hypocritical face and sneaking ways. If I was you, I'd be one thing or the other—not pious to the parson, and a thief on the sly."

Poor George! The temptation was too strong for him, and with a well-aimed blow he sent Will reeling against the wall. From that moment, of course, Will was his enemy, and all hope of doing good at that time by interference was at an end. Still, Edwin was his own, own brother, and he was determined to save *him* if he could.

"Edwin," he said, entreatingly, "come away, do. Oh! for our father's sake, don't bring this disgrace on us. Come away, Edwin!"

Edwin's face was perfectly pale with fright; but he went on filling the bag. One peach finer than the rest was in his hand, and George held his arm tightly, and looking wistfully into his face, said again, "Edwin, don't do this wicked thing!"

"Now, I'll tell you what it is," said Ben Davis, "you'd better 'share in the plunder, and pity the man,' as my father says, George."

"I'd scorn to do it," said George, while his honest face reddened with anger.

"You may as well," said Edwin, in a wily voice. "We're going to sell these peaches in Grindon, and if you like to join us, and tell no tales, you shall have enough to make up the half-crown for the farrier, and you needn't say a word to Mr. Lionel about your carelessness. You'll be certain to lose your place if that comes out."

It was a deep matter of shame with George afterwards, that, even for one moment, he allowed himself to think of this proposal; but it was only for one moment; for then, as if his Father in Heaven was speaking to him, he seemed to hear a voice saying, "My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not;" he seemed to hear Rhoda's little pleading tones, begging him to remember his high title, and not to bring dishonor on his Father's name; and from his heart he asked that Father to "deliver him from evil." His prayer was heard, and with flushed cheeks, but strong in the sense of right, he turned to Edwin, and said:

"I wonder you can even think of it. I'd bear anything sooner than be a thief. Edwin, oh! do come away—do, do come."

For an instant a relenting look came into Edwin's face, and he suffered George to take the big peach from his hand; but Will burst into a mocking laugh, and Ben at that minute

gave the alarm, and whispered hurriedly, "They're coming—here, Will, take the bag!" and the three boys were off like a flash of lightning. George tried to follow, but he did not know the way; and before he could do so, the strong arms of the gardener were thrown round him.

"George Heathfield!" said the worthy man, in sorrowful amazement. "Well, I little thought the thief was you!"

"It isn't, sir; oh! it isn't," said George, bursting into tears.

"Oh! very fine to deny it," said the under-gardener, who had always looked with a suspicious eye upon him; "but it won't do, my good fellow, with that peach in your hand!"

"How came you to be here so early?" said Mr. Jones.

"I came to look for some money I dropped," faltered George.

"Come, come, that won't do! You'll have to stop in the squire's lock-up room until such times as the squire himself can inquire into this."

"Oh! sir, you'll find it's a mistake. It wasn't me; it was—" But George paused, for he did not choose to tell of Edwin.

"Well, we must wait and see if it's a mistake. I'm inclined to think," said the

gardener, "for your sake, I'm sure, I hope, it may be, my boy."

George put his hands over his face, and sobbed as if his heart would break, which seemed to the gardeners a fresh confirmation of his guilt; but they did not delay about their work, and in a few minutes he was locked up in a loft above the stable, and told that he must wait till the squire returned from London, from whence he was expected that day.

George asked if he might see Mr. Lionel, as he knew that he would believe him; but the answer was that he had ridden over, the night before, to a house in the neighborhood, and was not expected back until the evening. With his last hope thus crushed, the poor boy felt truly wretched; and as he heard the bolts of the door drawn, and listened to the footsteps retreating down the ladder, he threw himself on some bundles of straw which lay in one corner, and cried long and bitterly.

Oh! it was a heavy punishment for that one fault of neglect; but, over and over again, he vowed that if he should be released and allowed to continue in his place, nothing should tempt him to put off his work for a moment, nor to give it to any one else to do.

The hour spassed slowly and wearily away

and no one came to the unhappy boy until the stable clock struck eleven, and then some bread and water were placed inside the door by the under-gardener. George could not eat, he was too miserable; so he laid his head down on the straw, and before very long he fell asleep. He did not wake until he heard the sound of horses' hoofs coming into the courtyard. He knew it was Mr. Lionel, and then he heard Mr. Jones come and talk to him. He heard Mr. Lionel's deep, grave tones; he knew from them that he was angry, because there was generally a gay, ringing sound in his voice, which was not there now.

Presently he heard a step ascending the ladder, and in another moment Mr. Lionel himself was standing in the loft. George sprang to him, and would have seized his hand; but the young squire put him back sternly, and said in his gravest voice:

"I am sorry to hear all this of you, George."

"Oh! Mr. Harwood—sir, please don't believe it; oh; don't, don't."

"I would rather not; but I fear things are against you, George," answered Mr. Lionel. "Now, the best thing you can do is to make a free and open confession of it. I shall be much more inclined to forgive you then."

"Well, sir, I lost the money you gave me for Joseph Nash, and I came early to find it."

"Stop!" said Mr. Lionel. "I told you to pay that last night."

George reddened with shame.

"Why was it not done?" asked the young squire, very sternly.

"Please, sir, I went to play."

"Is old William Brooks paid?"

"Yes, sir," said George, without a moment's hesitation; for he was certain that Edwin had done it.

"Did you miss the money for Joseph Nash last night?"

"Yes, sir, just as I was going to bed."

"And you say you came to look for it this morning? How was it that you were found with a peach in your hand?"

"Please sir—" But George only colored more violently, and stopped suddenly in what he was saying.

"Come, George, out with it all. Truth is always best; and if I can no longer trust you as my servant, I can, at any rate, respect you as a boy who will not tell a lie."

But George did not answer; he only bent his head very low, and large burning tears fell one by one on his hands.

"Crying won't mend matters," said Mr. Lionel, rather harshly. "I hope it is for

your fault you are crying ; but I would rather you spoke out bravely.

"I can't, I can't," sobbed the boy.

"I'm sorry for it, as now the law must take its course. To-morrow my father will examine you, and if nothing more satisfactory can be got at, you must be committed to the lock-up at Grindon, to await the Petty Sessions. A large bag, marked inside with the name of Heathfield, has been discovered near the garden wall filled with peaches, and I must tell you such things look very suspicious, George. I am sorry for *you*, and more sorry than I can tell you, that this disgrace should have fallen on your father's good name!"

At these words poor George's trouble seemed at its full height, and he buried his face in the bundle of straw, while deep heaving sobs shook his whole frame.

"Come, George, you'd better tell all about it, and then we'll try and hush it up, and it sha'n't be known in the village; I am speaking as a friend to you. You've been a good boy with me, and I am really disappointed." But George did not answer.

"Well, I am very sorry for this," said his young master ; "but I cannot compel you to speak, and I must not waste any more time in trying to do so."

George raised his head, and looked for one moment bravely and fearlessly into Mr. Lionel's face; and though his voice quivered, it was not with shame.

"Sir, I did not steal the peaches, and I wasn't going to."

"Ah! George, I wish I could believe you.'

"Won't you, sir?" said the boy, very earnestly.

"I fear I cannot," answered the young squire. "How did you come with that peach in your hand?"

"I cannot tell you that, sir."

Mr. Lionel sighed; he was really sorry for the poor little fellow, and, chiefly, because he seemed so hardened in his fault.

"Well, George, I see it's of no use, so I must leave you alone again to think over your conduct."

He turned to go; but George sprung up, and, clasping his hands, said eagerly:

"Oh! Mr. Lionel, comfort father; don't let it break father's heart, if I go to prison. And Rhoda, please tell Rhoda I'm sorry I spoke so cross to her last night; and tell father—" But he could get no further, and Mr. Lionel, pausing for a moment at the door, said, "George, won't you tell the truth for their sakes? think of your father's sorrow and shame."

But George only shook his head, and answered:

"I've told you the truth, sir, and I've got nothing more to say;" and then, when Mr. Lionel shut the door violently behind him, and drew the heavy bolts, George sat down again on the straw, and cried bitterly for some time.

"Come, come," he thought, "this won't do; it's like a baby for me to cry so; it won't do a bit of good. I wonder what they're doing at home?" But with the remembrance of home came other bitter thoughts, which put his good resolutions to flight, and the tears came back again.

Through a chink in the loft, he could see forms moving about in the courtyard; and looking up through the skylight, he saw that the shadows of evening were beginning to gather. Some dinner had been brought to him, and, as he began to feel faint with hunger, he went over and got it, and it was some amusement to him to eat it.

Just as he was wondering whether he was to sleep there all night, he heard voices on the ladder outside; the door was slowly opened, and a little figure came in soberly and quietly.

"Rhoda! Rhoda!" he cried, stretching out his arms to her.

"Oh! George," she whispered, "you didn't do it, did you?"

"No! Rhoda, *you'll* believe me, won't you?"

"Of course, I do. Poor, poor Georgy;" and Rhoda's tears fell fast upon his cheek.

"How did you get here?" he asked, as he drew her down to a seat on the straw.

"I begged father hard, and he let me come."

"Does he know?" asked George, in a low trembling voice.

"Yes, Mr. Lionel came and told us, and he asked father to let me come and try to make you tell; and oh! George, we're all so miserable."

"What does father say?"

Rhoda hesitated.

"Tell me," said George, earnestly; "I can bear it, Rhoda."

"Oh! Georgy, it was dreadful, when Mr. Lionel came in and said it. First, father got very red and angry, and thumped his fist down on the table with a great bang, and swore you were no son of his; and then suddenly he bowed his head down on his hands, and cried, and sobbed, as if his heart would break."

"Did he believe it, then?" said poor George, trying vainly to keep down his sobs.

"Yes," whispered Rhoda.

"My father—my own father!"

"Don't, George—oh! don't speak like that; it makes me so miserable; it'll all come right by-and-by."

"Not if he believes it. I don't care now about anything," said George, pitifully.

"Won't you tell me all about it, George?"

"Not all. I can't, Rhoda dear. I'll tell you all my part. I was very, very wrong about the money for Joseph Nash."

"And about William Brooks?"

"What about *him?*" said George starting.

"You didn't take the poor old man's money, Georgy. Oh! say you didn't!"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, Mr. Lionel says you told him you paid it, and that he called there just now, on his way to us; and the old man has never had a penny of it."

"I gave it to Edwin to pay."

"To Edwin? I quite forgot that."

"Yes, and he says he paid it."

"I'll ask him then when he comes in," said Rhoda, hopefully.

"Oh! why didn't I do my work myself at the right time," said George, bitterly. "What mischief it has caused."

"Poor Georgy; well, you'll do it all right another time, won't you?"

"Yes—oh! Rhoda, this is very, very hard."

"George, may I tell you what I've been thinking of, as I came along."

"Yes."

"Well, you know, father was very angry, and said, "No son of his, who was a thief, should ever enter his house again." George shuddered, but it was for Edwin's sake. "And then mother cried, and Edwin jumped up all white and trembling-like, and said, "Father, you *sha'n't* turn George off," and rushed out of the house, and banged the door behind him; and then, as I came along here, I thought, "George is some one else's child besides father's, and our Father up in Heaven is always ready to forgive, and He'll take care of him."

"Oh! will He, Rhoda?" said George; "I think He's angry with me, or forgotten me."

"No, no! George—think of what we are trying to live like—'members of Christ and children of God'—do you think He could ever forget His children? Now, I must run away, and the groom is coming to fetch you up to his room to sleep."

"Rhoda, before you go"—George stopped, and then stammered out—"couldn't you ask Him to take care of me?"

"Yes, Georgy, we will;" and side by side the two children knelt and told all their trouble to their Father, then rose strengthened

Oakford Farm.

"THE TWO CHILDREN KNELT."—P. 86

and comforted, and bade each other good night. George was not left long alone, however, for the groom soon came to tell him that he was to sleep with him; that the squire had returned from London, but was too tired to do anything that evening; and that George was to be examined the next morning at ten o'clock. The groom was a kind-hearted man, and, as his eyes rested on George's sad pale face and tear-swollen eyelids, he felt a great deal of pity for the boy, thief though he might be, and spoke to him kindly, entreating him to tell the whole truth, when he was questioned. George would only repeat his first story, assuring the groom that that was all the share he had had in the proceedings; and the groom felt sorry to think that he should be such a liar; but when some time afterwards he looked at his face, and saw him sleeping calmly and peacefully, with a smile, fearless and innocent as a little child's, upon his lips, he said to himself, "Shouldn't be surprised, now, to find that that chap's true, and that we've all been making fools of ourselves."

## CHAPTER IX.

"A GUILTY CONSCIENCE THE WORST ENEMY."

AND what was Edwin doing all this time? It had been a very miserable day to him; Will, in his hurry, had dropped the bag of peaches, and the boys had all quarrelled amongst themselves. Edwin had left the other two in a rage, and had spent the day in wandering about in the fields, wondering what George was doing, and every minute growing more and more wretched and reckless. At last, he went home, and sat silently listening to all that his father was so vehemently declaring about George. But when those dreadful words came out, "He shall never enter these doors again; he is no son of mine," Edwin could bear no more, but dashed out of the house, not caring where he went. The glorious setting sun was pouring its light down upon the valley, but the beauty seemed to mock his terror, and

he ran, as hard as he could, in the direction of the little wood, which lay along the foot of the hill, on the other side of the brook. He plunged into the deepest part of the copse, and sat down on a moss-covered stone, in the midst of large brake-ferns and foxgloves; then he buried his face in his hands, with a kind of fear, that, if any one should look at him, they would see his guilt in his eyes. He tried not to think, but it was of no use; a hundred demon voices seemed crying out his sin in his ears. Evening shadows were gathering fast, and darkness filled the little wood. The rooks had cawed their last "good night," and the only sounds that Edwin heard were, the wind which was whistling rather mournfully through the tops of the trees, and the rushing gurgle of the little brook. But a great terror was over the unhappy boy; he seemed unable to move hand or foot, though the darkness increased every moment. "Oh! why, why did I do it?" he thought; "why have I made myself so wretched? Father will cast me off when he knows it! But why should he know it? He shan't. Haven't I wanted to get George out of that place? And now that I have got my wish, I'm a fool. Nonsense, I won't fret about it. I'll go to Grindon fair to-morrow and spend the money, and enjoy

myself. That reminds me I must go to the Davises; I must make it up with them, or I shan't get on to-morrow.

"Ha! ha! Master George; I guess it will be a long time before *you're* thrown in your big brother's teeth again!"

But, hush! What sound was that? The boy started, and looked eagerly through the darkening gloom. "Who called me?" he muttered. There was no answer, except that a wilder gust of wind blew through the tops of the trees, and a bird flew from one branch to another. "I am sure some one called!" cried Edwin, springing to his feet. His voice sounded strangely in the silence of the wood, and roused a number of birds from their nests; a good deal of rustling and chirping followed, and then an owl flew out of the hollow trunk of an oak tree, and hooted as it fluttered over the boy's head. "What a fool I am to stay here," he said to himself; "no one knows my secret, except Will and Ben, and I'll get them to keep it. Why *should* I care?" And he tried to whistle as he made his way through the undergrowth of the wood, until he reached the little foot-bridge across the stream.

The night was chilly and dark; heavy black clouds had gathered in the sky, betokening a fall of rain; but Edwin did not

stop to think about this as he hurried along the path which led to Davis's cottage.

His first knock at their door was not heard; but when he repeated it, and no answer came, he softly lifted the latch, and entered. The little kitchen fire was blazing brightly, throwing a cheery light upon the comfortless and untidy room. A rushlight candle was burning in a broken tin candlestick on the bare deal table, and threw its dim light across the pages of a large Bible, which was lying open before Alfred Wilson. The cripple boy was sitting with his head resting on his hand, and his eyes eagerly fixed on the place he was reading, and his finger pointing to the words, which he said aloud, so that he did not hear the footstep at the door. Edwin did not speak, and hesitated whether he should turn round and go away; but he paused for a moment, to hear what Alfred was saying, and the verse which the cripple was spelling over was this: "I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against Heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son." Edwin's heart was full to bursting, and he closed the door behind him as gently as he had opened it, and went away. He sat down on a stone near the gate and thought over the words.

Oh! if he could only go and say them to his father, and tell him all the truth. But he was a coward; he dared not do it. "No more worthy to be called thy son." The words were true of him, and he bowed his head on his hands, and the large scalding tears rolled down his cheeks.

He had brought dishonor on his father's good name, disgrace on the respectability of the family, and was no more worthy to be numbered amongst them. Then came the thought of bitterness; "and this is not all; there is One whom you have sinned against even more than your earthly father—that Father in Heaven; by whose name you have been called, and into whose family you have been adopted."

Before he well knew what he was doing, Edwin had risen from his seat and returned to the cottage. For one moment, he looked in at the window, and saw that Alfred was still reading. Then he opened the door, and suddenly presented himself before the lame boy.

Alfred started; for Edwin looked so strangely different from his usual careless, reckless self. His light, fair hair was damp with the rain which was beginning to fall in torrents, and curling round his forehead; his cap was dragged down over his eyes; his

face was colorless; his lips quivering; and his dress was torn, in some places, by the briars through which he had forced his way.

"They're all out," said Alfred, when he had recovered from his surprise. "They've gone to Grindon over night, to be in time for the fair to-morrow; and I'm left to keep house."

"I don't want *them!*" muttered Edwin, in reply, as he came nearer to the fire.

"How wet and cold you look!" said Alfred, pityingly; "come to the fire—here's a chair."

Edwin did not answer, but stretched his hands out towards the hot coals, and knelt down on the hearth-stone.

"Have you heard anything more about poor George?" Alfred inquired, after a long silence.

Edwin turned his ashy pale face round from the fire, and said, in a low, eager voice:

"For God's sake, Alfred, don't speak to me of him."

"But only this one thing—Edwin, it isn't true what folks say, is it?"

"What do they say?"

"That—that he's stolen money as well; that he is going to prison, and that his father'll give him up."

A stifled sob was the only answer that

came from the wretched Edwin; and Alfred spoke again.

"I'm certain it's not true, and people will find out that it's not."

"How? Why? How can they?" cried Edwin, suddenly.

Alfred's face flushed. "I can hardly tell you why, Edwin: only I know it."

"Tell me how. Oh, Alfred, I would give anything if he was cleared; only I can't do it. Tell me what you mean."

"You will not understand me, perhaps," said Alfred, shyly: "I only mean that our Father up in Heaven takes care of all His children; and George is one of His, so He'll look after him—that's all."

Edwin remained silent for a few minutes: Alfred's simple, child-like trust was a new and strange thing to him; and it brought a kind of comfort with it. At length he rose, and came to Alfred's side; and spoke in a low, hurried voice:

"Can I trust you?—will you do something for me?"

"Yes;" and Alfred looked up at him in surprise.

"I'm very, very miserable; and I can bear it no longer. I've been a most mean, pitiful fool; but I never thought it would come to this." His voice shook so much,

that he could hardly go on. "But, Alfred, will you do something for me?"

"Gladly," was Alfred's eager reply.

Edwin put his hand into his jacket-pocket, and drew out a small leather purse; then, with trembling fingers, he drew from it the half-crown piece and the three shillings and sixpence with which Mr. Lionel had entrusted George. He laid them down on the table, and watched the color coming and going in Alfred's face, and the recoiling look which came over it, as the idea of Edwin's guilt dawned upon him.

"Yes; I know—you hate me! I know it quite well; I see it in your eyes. But, oh! Alfred, you don't—you can't know how wretched I am!" And Edwin fell on his knees beside the table, burying his face upon it, and sobbing aloud.

There was a long silence in the room, only broken by the ticking of the clock in the corner, the occasional fall of the ashes from the fire, and the deep, heaving sobs which burst from the kneeling boy. Alfred's pale, horror-struck face grew calmer; and at last, in a tone of heartfelt pity, he said, "Poor fellow!" and laid his thin hand in Edwin's.

"What shall I do? oh! Alfred, what *shall* I do?" he cried at length, raising his head.

"Go and tell it all to your father and

Mr. Lionel: I suppose that's all you can do."

"And I can't do that—so you needn't think of it," replied Edwin, despairingly. "I couldn't go to my father."

"Why not?" asked Alfred, whose only idea of a father was love, forgiveness, and tenderness combined.

"He'd turn me out."

"'I will arise, and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against Heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son,'" whispered Alfred to himself.

"What was that, Alfred?" said Edwin, starting: "I heard you say it before."

"It's what the Bible says; but I think it means our Father up in Heaven, Edwin."

"And would He hear me still?—could He, Alfred, after all the wrong I've done?"

Alfred was rather puzzled; to him the very fact of God being his Father would have been a sure sign that He would forgive him and love him, notwithstanding all his sin; but Edwin did not seem to think of it in this light, so he hesitated for some minutes about answering him. Then, all of a sudden, a bright look flashed over his face, and he cried:

"Yes, Edwin; don't you remember some-

thing that the clergyman says, when we first go into church, that's out of the Bible?—'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'"

"But, Alfred, I can't—I daren't confess," said Edwin, bitterly.

"You can confess it to Him, and then He will give you strength for the rest," said Alfred.

Edwin only shook his head; then pushing the money towards Alfred, he said, "I'll tell you how I got it. I didn't like for George to be in that place, and always held up as a pattern for me; and Will and Ben they stirred me up, and we set to work to watch for doing him a mischief. Well, you see it didn't come all at first; but one evening when we least expected it, George stops for a game of rounders on the green, and he was bragging how the squire had trusted him with money; and Will pulled my sleeve, and whispered, "Get it out of him—here's a fine chance;" so, you see, I asked him, when he stopped playing, where he was going, and he said, to Old William's, and then I offered to take the money, and he took it out of his pocket and gave it to me, and then, as he was doing it, I saw him drop the half-crown, and quick as thought I picked it up and pocketed it. I

wasn't then intending to spend it; not till Will told me that it would come in handy for Grindon Fair, and then, oh! Alfred, lad—I think the devil was specially at my elbow that evening, for Will got me to promise I'd join in getting the peaches, and from that minute I've known nothing but misery. There seems a great black horrible cloud over me that I can't get out of."

Alfred thought for a few minutes; then looking very earnestly into Edwin's ashamed and guilty face, he said, "Edwin, you won't let George suffer, will you?"

"No!" It was a low mumbled answer, but he meant what he said.

"You will give back this money?"

"Yes, you take it and keep it, Alfred; but we mustn't tell of Will and Ben, for their sakes partly, and most for yours; for they'd lead you a life, if you had anything to say to it."

Alfred was rather astonished at this piece of consideration, and it made him feel that there was more good in Edwin than he had ever given him credit for.

"Well, Alfred, I must be off now!" he said, abruptly.

"Are you going home?" asked Alfred.

"Home? No!"—and Edwin shuddered as he said the word—"it's no home for me any more."

"Where are you going?"

"Oh! out into the dark somewhere; to lie down under a hedge or in a barn."

"Stay and sleep with me," said Alfred, eagerly.

Edwin looked doubtful for a moment, but then consented; and Alfred poked out the fire, extinguished the candle, and the two boys went up into his little room. Edwin was soon in bed, but Alfred first knelt down to pray.

"What are you doing?" said Edwin, noticing that he did not get into bed.

"Praying," said Alfred, reverently.

"Pray out loud, and say something for me," whispered Edwin.

Alfred did so, simply and earnestly, and then crept into his place beside Edwin, and, as he laid his hand on the pillow, he felt it was wet with tears; but though he lay awake for a little while, thinking over that strange evening, sleep came to him before very long.

As soon as he heard the soft, regular breathing, Edwin rose, quietly dressed himself, for a new resolve had come to him, and then stole down stairs, raked together the hot coals, and wrote a few words on a piece of paper, which he put upon the middle of the table.

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He paused for a moment, looked round the little darkened room, then softly opened the door, and went out into the darkness.

Poor, weak, cowardly Edwin, afraid to meet like a man the wrath and the just punishment which were the consequences of his fault, had resolved to run away, and try his fortune in other lands. He had two or three shillings in his pocket, and Grindon was not far from the large sea-port town of Haverton, where he knew he could get a berth as cabin-boy in some outward-bound vessel; and before he returned to England, if he ever did so, the storm would have blown over.

Boys often think it is manly and a fine spirited thing to run away when they get into trouble; but, for my part, I consider that it is cowardly in them to do so, because it is only to shield themselves from the punishment of their own wickedness or folly. True manliness will show itself by confessing the truth, and then meeting the consequences bravely whatever they may be.

When the bright morning sun, pouring its flood of light and warmth into his little room, woke Alfred the next morning, he turned to look for his companion: but Edwin was gone!

## CHAPTER X.

### WILL HE TELL?

TEN o'clock had struck, and the servants' room at the Hall was full of anxious and expectant faces.

The squire, looking much disturbed and perplexed, was sitting at a little table, with Mr. Lionel at his right hand. Farmer Heathfield, in spite of his gout, had ridden up early in the morning to the Hall, and sat with his head bowed in his hands a little behind the squire; and Rhoda, her usually rosy face pale with anxiety and terror, was close beside him. Mr. Jones, and the under-gardener, with a whole crowd of servants, were standing round.

A quick decided step was heard outside the door, and directly after Mr. Lester entered the room; he had heard all the story from Mr. Lionel, and had come up to know the truth of the matter, and the fate of his favorite George. "Lionel, we had better call the boy in," said the squire. "Mr. Heathfield,

I suppose you've no objection to this examination being a public one? If you would prefer it, George shall be questioned privately; but I very much hope that the presence of so many listeners may have a beneficial effect in making him speak the truth." The farmer groaned; then suddenly raising his head, and striking the ground vehemently with his stick, he said, in a voice hoarse with suppressed sorrow and anger:

"Examine him as you will, sir; he can't be a much worse disgrace to me than it seems he be; and if he's done this thing, I swear he's no longer a son of mine! Examine him as you will, sir!"

Rhoda's little face worked convulsively while her father was speaking, and large burning tears gathered in her eyes and dimmed them, so that she could not see the look of pity on the faces round her; but a hand was laid kindly on her shoulder, and some one whispered, "Cheer up, little Rhoda; if George is true, you know who will take care of him.

She could not lift her face to see who it was, but she knew the voice was Mr. Lester's, and the words brought comfort to her young aching heart.

And now George was brought into the room. As he entered he cast one hurried glance around

him, and saw that his father, Rhoda, and Mr. Lester, were present. Then the burning color rushed to his cheeks, with shame at being accused before all these people; he bent his eyes on the ground, and did not raise them again.

The examination began, and the two gardeners, and Mr. Lionel, told all that they knew of the matter. The squire then asked George if he was willing to confess the truth, promising him at the same time to look over the matter, as it was his first offence. George, for one moment, lifted up his eyes, and looking steadily and gravely into his face, said:

"Sir, I was wrong about the money. I ought to have done Mr. Lionel's errand at once, and I'm very, very sorry for my fault in that; but as for stealing that or your peaches, I'd scorn to do it sir," and a look of honest indignation flashed from his eyes.

"But, George, you know you told me you had paid that money to William Brooks, and I found it unpaid when I went there," said Mr. Lionel, looking keenly at him.

George colored deeply. "I thought it was paid, sir; indeed, indeed, I did," he answered earnestly.

"Did you give it to some one else to do?" said Mr. Lester, suddenly.

"Yes, sir," replied George.

"Who was it?"

But George only shook his head, and said, "I can't tell you that, sir."

"Nonsense," said Mr. Lionel, "this is a mere subterfuge. I don't believe in this at all. Things are all against you, George."

"Yes, all against you," reiterated the squire, "and the law must take its course. Before we settle this finally take a few minutes to think about what you are doing, in choosing prison, disgrace, and blighted prospects, instead of confessing your sin and making what amends you can. I give you ten minutes, boy, to decide; and remember that God knows it all."

Any one who was looking in that direction could have seen that the farmer's hands trembled, as he grasped his stick more tightly and knit his brows; but most eyes were fixed upon George, as he stood by the table, the color dying from his cheeks, his eyes cast down, his hands tightly clasped together.

"You see," said the squire, pointing to the clock, "it now wants ten minutes to eleven; I give you until the clock strikes."

The minutes went slowly by, and still George stood there motionless; sometimes his lips moved as if he was going to speak,

but then again became still, and were more firmly compressed than before.

There was a breathless silence as the hands moved on towards the hour, but when it wanted two minutes of the appointed time, Farmer Heathfield spoke suddenly, as if the words were wrenched from him.

"George! for God's sake speak while there's time. A Heathfield never was in Grindon Gaol before."

George turned a look upon him which went to the hearts of all who saw it, but he only answered, "Father, I didn't do it; and for your sake I can say no more."

"For *my* sake! You're nothing to me, you young thief!" cried the father, angrily. "Speak the truth; that'll please me best."

"Hush! Mr. Heathfield, let him have this last minute quiet," said Mr. Lester; and the farmer sat down again.

The *last* minute! Rhoda thought it was the longest and most startling minute of her life; wouldn't George speak now? But no! the minute passed, and the clock began to strike. George started as the first stroke fell on his ear, then covered his face with his hands.

"The time is past, George," said the squire, "and you have chosen prison."

A wild cry rang through the room, and little Rhoda sprang forward.

"No! no! kind sir, don't send him to prison;" and another voice added:

"No! no!"

There was the sound of a crutch in the hall, and in another moment Alfred Wilson, flushed and out of breath, stood before them, with a morsel of paper in one hand and the lost money in the other.

"There it is, sir; it's all there, Mr. Lionel, the half-crown and three and sixpence; and please, sir, read this."

The Squire took the paper, put on his spectacles, and read, though not aloud:

"I stole the peaches and took the money; George had nothing to say to it.

"EDWIN HEATHFIELD."

"There is some mistake!" said the kind-hearted squire. Alfred Wilson, come in here with me;" and he led him into another room. In about five minutes they returned together, and the squire, with a pleasant smile on his good-natured face, stepped up to the table, and looking round him, said, "George Heathfield is quite innocent; the guilty person has confessed his crime, but I am not going to tell his name. George, my boy, I'm more glad than I can tell you that you are an honest lad, and a credit to your

father's name, instead of a disgrace. Shake hands."

George, pale and mystified, hardly knew what he was doing, as he put his hand into the squire's; but he quickly made his way round to his father.

"Father," he said, humbly and gently, "won't you call me your son still?"

"Forgive me, lad; forgive thy old father," said the farmer, in low, broken tones, for the squire had put Edwin's note into his hand, and the poor old man's heart seemed nigh to breaking. "I'm thankful to God it's not thee;" and he threw his arms round the boy, and then leaning on him, tottered out of the room. Rhoda closely followed them, her sweet face all in wonderment, but with one happy thought down in her heart, that their Father in Heaven *had* taken care of George.

The squire was left to explain matters, which he did in a manner that reflected great credit upon George, and every voice was unanimous in declaring that he had done credit to his father's name; while, in Mr. Lester's heart, there was a deep feeling of thankfulness that the boy had not disgraced his high calling, nor brought dishonor on the name of his Father in Heaven.

Farmer Heathfield was a more humble man from the day that he knew of Edwin's

sin. His family pride had received a severe blow, but he soon found that no one thought the less of him in consequence of what had happened; and George was exalted into a kind of hero.

Every effort to obtain news of Edwin was unavailing, and his vacant place was a dreary blank in the family circle, though no one ever spoke of him.

But little Rhoda, sad though she was about Edwin, could not repress her joy at George's release, and at his innocence being proclaimed. As she said herself, on that first evening when she sat rejoicing over him, with her arms tightly clasped round his neck, "Oh! George, it isn't only because you're not going to prison, and have kept your place still, that I'm so glad; it's because I can feel down in my heart now how happy it is to be a child of God, and what care our Father in Heaven takes of all His children."

## CHAPTER XI.

### LEAVING THE OLD HOME.

FOUR years slipped on in Oakford Farm, bringing many and sad changes with it. The farmer had never been the same man since the shock he had received at the time of Edwin's departure. Things had gone badly with him ever since; his health and spirits had failed, and, although he had been a prosperous man, he had not laid by as much as in prudence he ought; and consequently, now that the day of need had arrived, no provision had been made for it. George, though not yet sixteen, had been obliged to give up his place at the Hall, and devote himself to helping his father in the concerns of the farm; but between the failing strength of the old man and the inexperience of the boy, the farm was but badly managed. The farmer's savings, such as they were, were gradually consumed in making up his rent, and a great failure in the crops the fourth year put the finishing stroke to his misfortunes.

Too proud to ask assistance of any one, he submitted to his fate as best he could; but his wife and children noticed that his tottering limbs almost refused to carry him, and he was becoming prematurely old, haggard, and care-worn.

Winter had nearly come; the chill of its approach was already to be felt; and November fog and rain wrapt the farmhouse in a mist. The evening meal was spread on the table, and a cheery fire inside made up for the dreariness of the scene outside the house —at least, so George thought as he entered the room tired and weary from a hard day's work. A sad smile lit up his face as his mother pointed to his place by the fire, where a dry jacket and shoes were awaiting him.

"Thank you, mother," he answered quickly, and then turned to his father, who was sitting in his large chair.

"Well, lad," said the farmer, "hast done it?"

"Yes, father."

"Been to Grindon, George?" said his mother.

"Yes, mother; and I saw Mary at grandmother's."

"Oh! George, did you bring my thread and needles?" said Rhoda, at that moment coming in with some of the butter for which

her mother's dairy was famous, and placing it on the table.

"No!" said George, with that same sad, weary tone and smile. "Don't be angry, Rhoda! I forgot—I was thinking of something else."

Rhoda knew by his manner that the "something else" was nothing pleasant, and with her usual thoughtfulness she forebore to ask any questions.

The meal proceeded in silence, neither George nor his father eating much, but casting sorrowful looks at one another whenever their eyes met. After they had finished, Rhoda piled the tea-things together on the tray, and was preparing to take them into the next room, when her father called her back.

"Lay them down, my girl; lay them down!" Rhoda obeyed, placed the tray again on the table, while her mother, seating herself in the chair opposite to her father, took her knitting out of a large bag, and busied herself over a grey worsted stocking.

There was a long silence. George stood by the table, looking wistfully from his father's face to Rhoda's; but, at length, the farmer spoke.

"It's hard times; there's other poor folks in the world besides ourselves. Come here, little Rhoda!" In his fondness for her he

still used the pet name of her childhood, though she was now a tall and active maiden of fifteen. She came to his side and knelt down—why was that strange look of pity on his face? why were his eyes full of tears? what sad news was coming?

"Oh! think, father," she said, softly; "we're better off than others; we have a home, and many a one has none, God help them! I think, while we live in this dear old farm, things can't be very bad; at least, they may for a little while, but they'll come right, never fear.

She looked round for some confirmation of her words in the faces of the other two, but saw nothing there that raised her hopes, for tears were rolling down her mother's cheeks, and falling on the soft grey worsted. And George was twisting his fingers in all manner of odd forms, and looking straight into the fire.

"What is it, father?" said Rhoda, sadly.

"God help *thee*, lass; for it's homeless we are," said the farmer, bowing his head. Rhoda lifted her eyes to his face with a sad incredulous look.

"We must leave the farm, dearie; that's all," said her father. "I've given it up. There, don't grieve, my child; the world's broad; I knew it would come sooner or

later. Our lease is up to-day, and I haven't been able to renew it. Don't grieve, Rhoda." For the girl's face was buried on his shoulder, and he could not see it, but fancied she was crying.

She was *not*, however; and in a moment or two she raised her head, and asked in a low, hesitating voice:

"Father, must we leave Oakford?"

"I don't know yet, lass. Will *that* break your heart?"

"No, father;" and there was a strong brave look on Rhoda's face that said a great deal more.

"Supposing we got out to the New World, Rhoda, and try to make a new home?"

"Oh, father, let us try in England first;" and then she was silent.

"What are you thinking about, child?" said her father, stroking her hair softly with his hand, a few moments after.

"Thinking of what I would do to help mother in our new home," said Rhoda, cheerfully. George looked round at her in astonishment. Could it be that Rhoda did not like leaving their dear old home? *He* was battling hard to keep down his own sorrow, and he thought it would be far worse to Rhoda; yet she spoke hopefully of their *new* home.

The old farmer seemed to feel the same thing, for he said, rather sharply:

"Why, Rhoda, I thought you'd be sorry to leave the old place, and here you are talking already of the new one."

Sorry! He did not see her face as she flung her arms round his neck and kissed him, and then hurried out of the room. He did not see her as she stood in the little cottage porch, with the rain driving in upon her, and the wind whistling round her head, while she vainly tried to keep down the sorrow which was in her heart. He did not know that the child was struggling and battling with herself, to silence the murmur of rebellion against that Father in Heaven, who had laid this trial upon her. He did not see that bowed head, that tearful face, those clasped hands, nor hear the low pitiful sobs, which burst from Rhoda, or he would have known that she was sorry.

But there was One who *did* see it all, and who knew the brave unselfishness which had made her hide her own sorrow for the sake of others, and strive to be patient and cheerful. She was *His* child, cared for and watched over by Him, as much as if there was no one else in the world; and she had a home awaiting her which would never change or be taken from her, for she was "an inheritor

of the kingdom of Heaven." Thoughts like these passed through her mind quickly as she wept, and though they brought more tears they brought comfort also.

Suddenly she heard a step behind her, and George's arm was thrown round her neck. "Rhoda, here! what brings you out in the cold and wet?"

"I couldn't help it. Oh, George! I had to come."

"But, Rhoda!"

"Well?"

"Nothing, only is it so very bad to you?"

"Not worse I suppose than to the rest; but why *must* it be, George?"

"Father can't look after things as he did, you see; and I'm too young, and so it must."

"What shall we do, George?"

"Oh! we'll find something, never fear. Grandmother wants Mary to live with her, and I'll look for a place, and you'll take care of father and mother, Rhoda."

"*The dear old place!*" said Rhoda, gazing out through the thick mist of small rain, which nearly concealed everything outside, except the shadowy outlines of the barns and farm buildings.

"George, I can never love another place like this."

"Nor I" said George. "It's hard lines to

leave it, Rhoda;" and the boy's voice quivered as he spoke.

Rhoda laid her hand gently on his, and then said, in her own simple way, "I never knew till now how bad Abraham must have felt when God told him to leave his home, and wander off to look for a new home which He would show him." Almost all Rhoda's small store of information was derived from Bible histories; nothing else was known to her in her quiet village life; they were living realities to her, the characters seemed like her friends and companions, and so it was natural that she should think of them in her trouble. George gave one long sigh, and then began to whistle a tune, and finally buttoned his jacket across him, and set off to see that the farm-gates were locked. Rhoda watched him going along the path, and through the little wicket at the end, and then stood still, listening to the weary howling of the wind and thinking about Abraham. "Yes, he was to go into a far-off goodly land," she thought — "a land which God knew about, though he didn't; and he was not to mind about the weary travelling first, nor to think about the home he had left, because the one he was going to was so much better. And I must be like him, because I've a better home beyond, that *can't* change."

And then she turned and went back into the house, with a smile on her face: not of forced calm and cheerfulness, but one which told of the peace of a happy child who rested in her Father's love.

Two days passed away, and the whole village was in a state of commotion at the news that Farmer Heathfield had given up his farm. Everybody had something to say about it, and every one told a different story; but all agreed in being heartily sorry for their good neighbor, who was well known for his open-handed generosity and uprightness of character.

The family were anxious to move out as soon as possible, as the new tenants were coming in speedily. They were people of the name of Lewis, who had lived near Grindon, and whom the farmer knew slightly —pleasant friendly folk, who felt for the old man's failing strength, and admired him for the way in which he gave up his home.

Rhoda was an invaluable help to her mother in-doors, and George was the same to his father. Their busy young hands got through the work in a surprising way, and Rhoda, for her part, was thankful that there was this occupation to fill her mind and prevent her from thinking about the hard trial before her.

As yet no definite place was fixed upon for their future abode; and yet it was on the following Monday they were to leave Oakford, and this was Thursday. There was always their grandmother's house for them to go to; but Rhoda was afraid that it would be rather trying to the old dame to receive so many visitors at once. The little maiden was busy by her mother's side in sorting a large chest of household linen, and piles of snowy damask were heaped up on the floor and table, when a knock came at the door, and she ran with a table-cloth across her arm to open it.

She blushed rosy red, as she saw that it was no less a personage than the squire himself who stood outside.

"Is your father at home?" said Mr. Harwood, kindly.

"No, sir; he's in the field; but if you'll step in, I'll go and fetch him," she replied shyly. "Mother, here's the squire;" and then the old gentleman came in, sat down in the large oaken chair, and put his hat and stick down beside him. "Yes, call him if you please; and stay, my little girl, where is that good brother of yours?"

"George, sir?" said Rhoda, coloring now with pleasure.

"Yes, call him too;" and away Rhoda bounded to the fields.

The squire had come on an errand of kindness, which was quickly explained to the farmer. Hearing to his surprise and sorrow that he was giving up his farm, he had come to ask him to take the charge of a small portion of his property, not far from the Hall, to look after the men, pay them their wages, and live in a small house (which Rhoda had always known by the name of the Red Cottage) free of rent. From the kind way in which this was put, the old farmer was prevented from feeling that it was done mostly for his sake, for the squire dwelt much upon the benefit it would be to him to have an upright man whom he knew, and who had such large experience as Farmer Heathfield, to look after his concerns.

"But, sir," said the old man, "I'm past my prime now. Life is labor and heaviness to me. Mayhap, I'd not be equal to the work?"

"Oh!" said the squire, "as for that, Mr. Heathfield, it wouldn't be heavy. The men will come to you for orders sometimes, and if you can occasionally take a turn round the fields, and look at things, I sha'n't require more."

The farmer still looked hesitating, and the squire went on:

"Your grandfather and mine knew each

other, so did our fathers; and you and I, Heathfield, have been friends since our boyhood. Come, I see your little daughter's pleading face says the same thing as I do."

"What do you think, Rhoda, lass?" said her father.

"Oh! stop in Oakford, father, if you can," she said eagerly; and so it was settled that the farmer should go to the Red Cottage.

"And now there's something I want to say about George. I think it's a pity he should not come back to us, and be Mr. Lionel's servant. What do you say, George, my man?"

"I should like it, sir, and thank you kindly," said George, looking very bright.

"You'll live with us entirely then, and when we go up to town, you'll come too; but you'll often see the old folks at home, and I know you'll be a good lad."

"Ay, that will he," said his mother, proudly. "Never were better children than him and Rhoda, sir, though I as brought them up says it of them."

And so there was some light thrown upon their dark lot, and the Heathfields in their trouble were not forsaken.

## CHAPTER XII.

### THE FIRST EVENING IN THE RED COTTAGE.

THE last farewell had been taken of the old home. The old farmer and his wife had stepped from its threshold for the last time, and were seated in the gig which was to take them to spend the day in Grindon, while George and Rhoda prepared the Red Cottage for their reception.

Rhoda had wandered round the dear old garden, to take leave of every plant and tree, and filled her hands with monthly roses and chrysanthemums, and her mind with memories of the happy days gone by; but she was not inclined to be gloomy. At least she did not give way to gloom, for she had plenty of work to do; and as she laughingly told George, who was looking rather moodily over the garden-gate, she had no time to cry and make herself wretched. Her eyes were sometimes raised to the bright blue sky above her, with a thought of the fairer home beyond, which her Saviour had purchased, and was

preparing for her; and the words in her heart were, "that so among the sundry and manifold changes of the world our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found." But she went through the day with a brave heart, which helped George to do the same, and evening saw them settled in their new abode.

"It's not a bad little place, is it, George?" said Rhoda, looking round the small apartment which she had worked so hard to enliven and make comfortable before their parents' arrival.

"It is not," said George, glancing with pleasure at the bright, glowing fire, the shining oak table spread for tea, the green curtain drawn across the window, the armchairs by the hearth, and the mug of flowers in the middle of the table.

"Why, Rhoda, it looks quite home-like already."

"Yes, it does; but oh! George, we've forgotten the kettle."

"I'll soon settle that;" and while he went to fill it, Rhoda opened the door, and looked out anxiously to see if there were any signs of her parents' approach.

She could hear and see nothing, but the stars were coming out one by one, and the night was very fine, which made her linger

in the porch. A little straight path led down to the gate, and she was rather astonished in a minute or two to see a boy coming up to the door. It was too dark for her to recognise him, but she soon knew the voice to be that of Ben Davis.

Now, Rhoda had not quite outgrown her fear of Ben, though Alfred had told her that lately he was very much altered, and had become much kinder to every one about him; nevertheless, she did not care to see him, and in rather a sharp tone asked him what he wanted.

"Alfred asked me to come," said Ben; "he wanted to know how you'd got on with your moving."

"Will you tell Alfred we're all right and quite comfortable now? How is he?"

"Bad enough, and likely to be worse," was Ben's reply. "I say, Rhoda, let a chap warm himself by that jolly fire."

Rhoda unwillingly consented, and Ben came in. George did not look too well pleased to find him when he came in with the kettle from the spring.

But Rhoda saw, from a frightened and ashamed look about Ben, that something was the matter, and she also noticed that Ben was much more gentle than he had ever been before.

"Look here!" said Ben, suddenly. "I've not come for nothing; I've come along to say that it wasn't all Edwin's fault that time long ago; and I've not been easy that you should think it was. He never told of us, not Alfred neither, but still we was the worst by far—Will and me; and you may tell the old people that if it hadn't been for us, Edwin wouldn't have stole them things. There, now I have said it—and I've wanted to, ever so often."

"But we knew this, Ben," said George.

"Yes, I know that; I didn't say as you didn't, did I? I only mean that I'm sorry along of *my* share."

"Thank you," said Rhoda, looking up kindly into his rough face.

"We're in a bad way," said Ben; "such a row at our place. Two policemen came down, and clapped handcuffs on Will and marched him off to Grindon Gaol: it was a house-breaking concern—I knew it would bring him no good when he got mixed up with them Grindon chaps." George and Rhoda looked startled: such events rarely happened in quiet little Oakford.

"Oh, Ben, how dreadful!" said Rhoda. "Has poor Will done this?"

"Do you think I'm going to tell tales of my own brother? indeed, then, I'm not."

"*You've* had nothing to say to it, have you, Ben?" said George.

"No, thank goodness; the squire's peaches was my last job in that line, and I hope never again as long as I live to set fingers on what isn't mine."

"That's right," said Rhoda heartily; and George added "Hurrah!" in a quiet tone of pleasure.

Ben looked down sheepishly. "I'm working at Farmer Bentley's now, and I do want to get on a bit. Jessie'll be badly off, and poor little Alfred too (and he's a good chap), what with father's drinking, and Will in gaol, if I don't bestir myself—and your father knows Farmer Bentley, and I'm afraid, when he hears that Will's taken up, he'll pack me off; and if you could get a word said for me, I'd be right glad."

Both George and Rhoda promised that they would; and then Ben muttered something of thanks and good-night, and went away.

As soon as he was gone, Rhoda looked up in her brother's face and said:

"Oh! George, there are worse troubles in the world than ours."

"Ay, truly—poor Ben, how changed he is;—I expect that's Alfred's doing partly," replied George.

"Yes, *partly*. But here come father and mother."

Their look of surprise and pleasure quite rewarded their children, and the first evening in the Red Cottage was by no means so dreary as they had thought it would be.

Before they went to bed, the farmer bade George bring him the Bible, and he read aloud the 103d Psalm; and Rhoda's heart swelled with thankfulness as she listened to the words, "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him." Then the farmer knelt, and they all followed his example, while he read the General Thanksgiving aloud; and it was a hearty and deeply-meant Amen which ascended from that little family party to "the Father of all mercies."

## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE CRIPPLE BOY COMES IN SIGHT OF HOME.

GEORGE went away to London with the young squire shortly before Christmas; Mary remained with her grandmother, and Rhoda cheered up her father and mother in their new home.

Farmer Heathfield said her bright face and her hopeful words and manner did more than anything else in reconciling him to the Red Cottage; and Rhoda herself soon gave up thinking regretfully of the dear home she had left, and strove to do her duty in that state of life to which it had pleased God to call her. And when she got a little weary of her hard work (for almost all the real labor of the household fell to her share), she rested herself with the thought of brighter days that she knew would come, and bore on bravely in the hope of them. It was rather lonely sometimes, now that her sister and

both her brothers were gone; but she had made friends with Kate and Frank Lewis, the children of the tenants who had come to the farm, and they came to see her, went to the catechizing class with her every Sunday, and helped to brighten her life greatly.

Then, also, she had her visits to Alfred, who was growing weak in health, and was entirely confined to the house. She went to him as often as she could, to cheer and comfort his suffering life. And thus Christmas-tide passed by, with its holy lessons of love from God, and peace and good will towards men. The old year, with its sins, its sorrows, and its changes, passed away, and the new year, with its hidden future and its bright hopes, came in. The early spring arrived, with its promise of better things; the cold winds of March and the soft showers of April both did their work. And then May came, beautiful, fresh, sunshiny May, with its wealth of leaves and flowers, its pleasant, bright days and lengthening evenings.

It brought a great deal of brightness to Rhoda. George was to return from London; and Mary came over from Grindon for a little while. Trouble had taught Mary many lessons; it had humbled and softened her character, and her constant attendance upon

her aged and infirm grandmother had made her less selfish and more thoughtful about others.

There was one topic which greatly occupied the minds of all the villagers of Oakford. On the 13th of May the young squire was to come of age, and there was to be a general rejoicing. He was the heir to a very large amount of the property around, and would be the future landlord of a great many of the people; consequently, his twenty-first birthday was a very important day in Oakford.

Already, large tents were being erected in the park, and preparations for a great feast were going on. The Grindon band was coming over, there was to be a dance on the green, a balloon was to go up, and a grand display of fireworks was to conclude the evening.

It was two days before the eventful birthday, and Rhoda, full of the various pieces of news she had collected, set out to visit Alfred.

When she reached the house, Jessie met her, and Rhoda noticed that the girl's hard face wore a softened look, and that there were traces of sorrow in it.

"How is Alfred?" she asked.

"Oh! Rhoda Heathfield, I'm glad you're

come! Alfred's not in worse pain; but there's a look about him, a strange look, as if he couldn't stop here long; and sometimes I see him put his hands together, and he says 'Not long! not long!' and then something about 'home.' Oh! Rhoda, I'm grieved he should go." And tears of honest grief rolled down Jessie's cheeks. It was not for nothing that the cripple boy had been placed in that wretched home. Rhoda tapped gently at the cottage door, and it was Alfred's voice which told her to come in. He was lying on his bed, which, for the sake of airiness and comfort, had been placed in the front room. His sunken features lit up with a bright smile of pleasure as Rhoda entered; and, to her astonishment, she saw that Ben Davis was sitting by his side, and had been reading the Bible to him; but he rose with a shy look when she came in, and shut the book.

"I'm so glad you've come, dear Rhoda," began Alfred; "I did want you so much."

"How are you?" said Rhoda, gently, as she took the thin white hand in hers.

"The pain's not worse, thank you; and I'm so happy."

"What beautiful flowers!" Rhoda said, pointing to a mug of lilies of the valley and

white narcissus blossoms, which stood on a little table by his side.

"Yes; Mr. Lester has been here to see me, and Mrs. Lester sent me these. Aren't they pretty?—they make me think of so many happy things."

Meanwhile Ben had shifted uneasily from one foot to another, and then pushed his chair towards Rhoda.

"How happy *you* look!" said Alfred, looking into her smiling face with sympathising pleasure.

"Oh! Alfred, George comes home to-day, or to-morrow; and the day after is the birthday. And such preparations are going on: it's to be grand fun. First, a cottage-garden flower-show; and then games, and boats on the water, and a dance on the green, and a band, and a sheep roasted whole, and a bonfire, and a balloon and fireworks—won't it be beautiful?"

"Yes," said Alfred, listening to all these glowing accounts with a peaceful and contented smile on his face.

"You know, Mr. Lionel's coming of age," said Rhoda, eagerly; "and he's the heir of all the property. Oh! Alfred, I wish you could be there and see it."

Alfred shook his head, and smiled brightly, as he answered:

"Rhoda, I'll soon be going to my inheritance too. I've been thinking about it so often lately."

"How do you mean?" said Rhoda, looking rather puzzled.

"'The child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of Heaven,'" whispered Alfred, so low that no one but Rhoda could hear him. "Mr. Lester has been talking to me about it; and, Rhoda, to think that I am going to it—I, that have been so bad. But it's just because the Lord Jesus loves me, and died for me; because I'm one of His members, and He has said, 'Father, I will that they also whom Thou hast given Me be with Me where I am.'"

Rhoda's tears dropped fast on the hand she held, for Alfred was dear to her as one of her own brothers.

"Oh! Alfred, we'll miss you so."

"You wouldn't keep me, would you?" said Alfred, moving uneasily.

"Oh! I wish—I wish you might stay," sobbed Rhoda.

Alfred looked at her for a moment, sadly; then his face brightened, and he said, "Rhoda, Mr. Lionel, they say, is going to be married, and he's coming to live here at Oakford Hall, and the squire's going to live away in the south of England for his health.

Well, do you think Mr. Lionel's friends in London, or his father and mother at Barkstone, will try to persuade him to stop with them instead, when they know he's coming to his inheritance?"

"No," said Rhoda, below her breath.

"No; because he's going to greater happiness. He's a very rich man, they say, with all that his uncle has left him; and they wouldn't keep him back from his riches."

"No, they wouldn't," said Rhoda, again.

"And, Rhoda, I'm richer than he is—at least, I'm nearer to my riches. You wouldn't keep me away from them if you could, would you?"

Rhoda shook her head; but, after a moment, she whispered, "I'll be glad for *you*, Alfred—glad that you've no pain or trouble any more."

"I wouldn't have had less, Rhoda," said Alfred, his whole face lighting up with a bright, radiant smile; and he stretched out his hand for his Bible. "There's a mark—I asked Mr. Lester to mark it—the verse that's shown me what all the pain and trouble has been for," he said, eagerly: "please read it to me."

And Rhoda read: "'Strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, unto all patience and long-suffering with joyfulness: giving thanks unto the Father, which

hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light.'" She bowed her head over the book when she had finished.

"Rhoda," said Alfred, "that's what the training is for. We're being taught, like children at school, that we may be made meet for our inheritance. Don't grieve, Rhoda, because my Father is ending my school-days early, and sending for me to come home. You've been very kind to me; and you'll think of me up in my happy home, safe, safe for ever; and they're all so kind—Jessie and Ben"—here he glanced round, half shyly, at his cousin, who stood with his arms folded, leaning against the mantelpiece. Ben tried to smile, but it was a vain effort, and he turned away hastily.

Rhoda stood up. "I must go, Alfred!"

"Very well. You'll come and tell me all about the birthday, won't you?"

"Yes, How happy you do look, Alfred!"

"Do I? Do you know, two days ago, Mrs. Lester was here, and she told me that my name, Alfred, meant 'all peace.' I'm glad it does."

Rhoda tried to say something, but could not; and Alfred held her hand for a moment, and said, in a low voice:

"And whenever you get into troubles and trials, and things are all wrong, Rhoda, will

you think about *our* inheritance, where there are no more changes, or sorrows, or storms, and be glad that I am in the home where it is 'all peace'?" And, exhausted with so much speaking, Alfred laid his head down wearily upon the pillow.

Rhoda pressed his hand in silence, and went away, thinking about his calm, peaceful face all the way home. It rather sobered her walk, and she lingered in the garden before entering the house when she had reached it, gazing out over the quiet fields away to the hills, where the sun was going down among gorgeous clouds of crimson and gold.

She was so lost in thought, that she did not hear the click of the gate-latch, or a step on the pathway, until a hand was on her shoulder, and a strong, manly voice said:

"Halloa! Rhoda, haven't you got a welcome for me?"

"George! George!" she cried, in joyful surprise—"why, what a man you are!"

"Six months makes some difference in a fellow—or it ought—at my age," said George smiling; "but how are father and mother?"

"Come in! come in!" cried Rhoda, clinging to him as she led him triumphantly into the house.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### THE BIRTHDAY OF THE HEIR.

THE 13th of May rose as clear, bright, and sunshiny as even Rhoda could desire, and at a very early hour the bells of the old grey church were ringing a merry peal to welcome in the young squire's birthday.

Mr. Lionel, as we know, was the old squire's eldest son, and the heir to all his property; but, in addition to this, his mother's eldest brother had died, and he inherited all his wealth. The old squire had come down from London to see his son duly installed as master at Oakford Hall, and the young man was full of bright hopes and plans for the future, though, as he lay awake listening to the joyful chiming of the bells, he thought gravely and earnestly enough of the responsibilities of his new life.

But Rhoda's thoughts on that bright morning were of the gayest description. She had no grave duties to enter upon that day. It

was to be to her one of unmixed happiness, and as she heard the bells set up their merry peal, she clapped her hands for joy. She was standing in the garden, looking with some anxiety at the flower which she was going to bring to the show that day.

It was a white rose—off her own tree, which Frank Lewis had transplanted with great care to the Red Cottage. The blossom was as perfect as that which, long ago, Rhoda had watched with such anxious care for her pastor's lady-bride. It was nearly open, but not full-blown ; and the richness of the deepening color in the centre, the graceful curl of its outer petals, the purity and freshness of it in the morning dew, and the bright soft green of its glossy leaves, made it altogether a perfect flower. It was very early for roses, but the season had been extremely mild and sunny, and the spot in which it was planted was so sheltered and warm, that it had every chance of coming to perfection. Rhoda looked at it with silent pleasure, wondering very much whether it would get a prize, and then George came out to look and admire as well.

Rhoda was not a little proud of the manly appearance of her brother. His six months in London had greatly improved him, and his honest and reliable face was unchanged,

except that it had become less childish and more firm. Mr. Lionel had given him a week's holiday, and he had come to spend it at the Red Cottage, which put the finishing stroke to Rhoda's happiness.

"Aren't the bells beautiful, George?" she said brightly, as they stood together in the garden listening to their pleasant sound.

"Yes," said George; "and I like to think they're for Mr. Lionel. Oh! Rhoda, there are very few like him. I hope he'll be happy."

"So do I; and I think he will," said Rhoda.

Theirs were not the only voices that proclaimed that wish, as the bells pealed through the valley. Old and young, from the richest to the poorest, wished well to the young squire, and many a hearty "God bless him!" ascended to Heaven on his behalf in that calm, still, morning hour.

The time seemed to pass very slowly to Rhoda and Mary, until the old clock struck eleven, and crowds of the villagers in their gayest holiday dresses were seen coming towards the park, where tents and marquees were erected. In one of these, with a large red flag floating from it, the flower-show was going on, and thither Rhoda wended her way with her lovely rose.

She had the delight of having the first

prize awarded to it, as being such a perfect specimen of its kind, and also for being in bloom so very early.

Then the band began playing its lively tunes, and it was proposed that a large party should go in a boat on the lake. Rhoda would gladly have gone, but Kate Lewis was afraid of the water; and as she was almost a stranger amongst all the people, Rhoda good-naturedly offered to stop with her; so George, and Frank, and Mary got into the boat, and Rhoda and Kate walked about listening to the music and looking at the flowers. The time thus passed pleasantly enough until the boating-party joined them, and Frank declared that nobody was so kind and thoughtful as Rhoda, and that it was her turn now to go; but she had only a few minutes on the water, for their dinner was ready, and they all seated themselves at the well-spread tables, to partake of the plentiful good cheer which the squire's liberality had provided. After dinner Farmer Heathfield rose, and proposed the young squire's health, and a deafening cheer rose from the whole community. It died away for a moment, and then rose higher, louder, and stronger than ever, in "Three times three for Mr. Lionel, and God bless him."

The young squire, who had been going

about amongst his guests, seeing that every one had enough to eat and drink, and spreading his cordial words and kindly jest among them, stood very still while the cheering went on so lustily about him, with his hat in his hand, his manly, handsome face becoming very pale with the excitement, and his lips quivering. When the cheering had a little abated, he tried to speak. "My good friends and neighbors," he said, in a faltering voice, "I thank you most heartily. This expression of your warm and kindly feeling towards me is the greatest pleasure I have had to-day." Here there was an attempt made to stop him with another cheer, but it was quelled with cries of "Hush! hush! the young squire is speaking." And he went on, his face glowing and his voice growing more firm and clear with every word: "I can only say that I trust I may never forfeit your esteem, and I can assure you that, with God's help, it is my earnest desire that your welfare should be my chief interest and care. Each one of you, I hope, will find me, as your squire, your landlord, and, above all, as your friend, treading in my father's steps, and following his example. *More* than *this* I know you will never desire;" and the son glanced down affectionately and reverently at his aged father, who was seated beside him, bent

with years and ill health, but still looking as bright, kindly, and good-natured as ever.

Then a cheer, heartier and louder, if that were possible, than had arisen before, rose up for the old squire, in which Mr. Lionel joined, his eyes moist with tears, and his voice thrilling with emotion. It made the old woods ring again; it startled the deer from their resting places; it came back in an echo from the far-off hills—that heart-felt token of appreciation of him who had been for so many years their friend and kindest helper. Then the old squire rose, and, leaning on his son's arm, spoke a few simple words of thanks, telling them how he had loved them all, and loved the old place, and how he should never forget them, though he was obliged to leave them. "But," he added, laying his hand on his son's, "I am leaving you a representative, that *you* may not forget *me;* and, my dear friends, I shall take away that cheer in my heart, that I may never forget *you.*" And then there rose another more prolonged and loud, as if the people were determined that the squire's remembrance of them should be a strong one. Other toasts followed, and then the company dispersed themselves in various directions.

At five o'clock the balloon was to go up, and the scattered crowds gathered again in

the centre of the park, where the ascent was to take place. There was some little delay at first, then the cords were cut, and an eager murmur of surprise ran amongst the spectators as slowly the balloon rose into the air.

"Oh! Rhoda, shouldn't you like to be in it? I should," cried Frank, as his eyes intently followed its progress.

"No, no," said Rhoda, shutting her eyes, as if made dizzy by the sight; "I'd rather stop down on earth, Frank—much."

George laughed. "Rhoda is much too matter-of-fact for such flights, Lewis. Once, when I asked her if she wouldn't like to have wings, and fly instead of walking, she said 'No; except for one thing, that it would save mother the expense of buying boots for me.'"

A merry laugh burst from the whole young party, and no one joined in it more heartily than Rhoda herself.

"But look!" she cried; "how fast the balloon is going now! It seems glad to get free. Oh, it is beautiful!"

"Yes—see! it is almost getting out of sight. No! there it comes again!"

"Hurrah!" and then another loud cheer for the balloon rose from the assembled throng.

We cannot linger over every moment of

that day of enjoyment, nor tell how the boys ran races, and the girls played games; how the old people rested themselves on the seats and chatted to each other, and every one was as happy as a bright sky, a kind host, and liberal entertainment could make them; how merrily they all danced when the band struck up its liveliest tunes, and how the evening seemed slipping away without their knowing it.

But at last the twilight deepened into darkness, and then the quiet villagers of Oakford were startled and delighted with a grand display of sky-rockets. Up they went, with a strange unnatural whiz, and then burst into numbers of brilliantly-colored stars, which fell amongst the crowd like a shower of fire-drops, causing a peal of merry laughter and a general scuffle to follow.

"Look, Rhoda!" said Mary; "that's a Catharine wheel. I saw one once in Grindon. Isn't it pretty, going round so quick?"

"Yes; I like that. Oh dear! it is done; but, Mary—oh! *how* beautiful. That was a blue star that went up that time, and there's a red one, and that's golden. Oh! I never saw anything like that; and do you see—" And here Rhoda became speechless with delight as her blue star suddenly burst, and a number of little bright stars fell from it.

At this moment the soft sound of music fell upon their ears, which seemed to come from the lake, and turning eagerly in that direction, they saw what looked like an enchanted scene. The boat, all lit up with lamps of different colors, was moving slowly along the water, while the band played "God save the Queen;" and at the same moment, as if by magic, the words "Good-night," in every possible color, glowed forth from amongst the trees. There was a hush in the crowd, almost perfect stillness, until the National Anthem was ended, and then another loud and hearty cheer of gratitude arose for the young squire. When it died away, his voice rose clear and calm on the still evening air, "Thank you, my friends. It has been a great pleasure to me to see you all here; and now good-night."

"Good-night, sir, and thank you," came from every side; and then, as the lamps began to die away, the crowd slowly dispersed.

"It's a grand thing to come into one's inheritance," said George, as he walked home by Rhoda's side. She did not answer, for she was thinking of Alfred's words: "I'm richer than he is; at least, I'm nearer to my riches. You wouldn't keep me away from them, would you?" and she whispered to herself, "Alfred

is right. It is a better inheritance than this that the Son of God died to purchase for us with His own blood;" and she went to bed thinking of

"That beautiful place He is gone to prepare
For all who are washed and forgiven."

## CHAPTER XV.

### ALFRED ENTERS INTO HIS INHERITANCE.

IT was Ascension-day, and the bells were ringing for service.

George and Rhoda had paused on their way to church, to inquire for Alfred. Jessie met them with tearful eyes. "Come in!" she said, softly; "he hardly knows us; but come in."

They entered—they knew it was into the presence of death, but there was nothing to alarm or terrify them in that. Alfred was lying very still, with his eyes closed; and only the strange look on his face and his labored breathing showed that the end was near.

At the sound of their voices he opened his eyes and smiled faintly, holding out his thin hand. At first he could not speak, but after a few moments, he whispered, "Have you come to tell me, Rhoda, this is the day?"

"It's Ascension-day, and we are going to church," said Rhoda, gently.

Alfred smiled. "It's the day for me to go home. Oh, I'm glad it's to-day!"

"The same day that our Saviour went up into Heaven," said Rhoda, catching at his meaning.

"Yes. Were you very happy yesterday?"

"Yes, very."

"And you'll be glad for me to-day, because I'm going to *my* inheritance." Rhoda's tears flowed fast.

"Think of me in church, Rhoda; you've been very kind to me, but the place is prepared. I mustn't stop—my Father has sent for me—don't stop me—oh! don't;" and he wandered off into incoherent words.

"The bells! the bells! it's for church; it's because I'm going home! they are glad, and so am I," he said, suddenly, as the sound caught his ear; and then he murmured to himself, "What was it—they read—'I ascend unto My Father, and your Father,—yes, to-day! to-day!" George looked at Rhoda. "We must go now!" he whispered. "Good-bye, Alfred, we'll come again and see how you are;" and his voice trembled with the tears he could hardly conceal.

"I shall be quite well then," said Alfred, holding his hand and looking keenly into his face. Then he turned to Rhoda, and whispered, "Good-bye, dear Rhoda; oh! don't

forget our name and our home in Heaven—the home He died to bring us to;" and a smile of glowing thankful love beamed in the face of the dying boy.

Rhoda could not trust herself to speak, but with one more long fond look into that sweet face, she turned away. Jessie followed her, sobbing: "The doctor says he won't hold out the day: and he goes on that way. Oh! Rhoda, if we had but loved him more; he's been so kind and forgiven us all, and goes on begging us to come to Jesus, and to meet him in his home; and sent his love to poor Will, when he gets out of prison, and to ask him to turn over a new leaf. Oh, Rhoda! we love him now, and it's too late—too late!"

"Poor Jessie!" was all that Rhoda could find voice to say; but she put her arms round her neck and kissed her, and then she followed George very soberly along the path to church.

The beautiful service for the day calmed her, though many tears fell upon her Prayer-Book as she went through it, and thought of the happy dying boy whom she had just quitted.

With her whole heart she followed the words of the glorious collect, which prays, that "as we do believe our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into the Heavens, so we may

also in heart and mind thither ascend, and with Him continually dwell;" and then that she might ever live in the remembrance of her high calling, sanctifying her daily life, and her daily duties, by "having her conversation in Heaven."

In the afternoon, she set out for one of her long rambling walks with George, Mary kindly promising to take her place at home while they were absent.

But before they had climbed to the top of the hill, a sound from the valley below fell upon their ears, and made them pause in their talk.

It was the tolling of the bell from the old grey tower of the church which lay beneath them half-buried in trees, and they knew, when they heard it, that the happy boy had been called to his Father's home; that their friend Alfred had entered into the inheritance in the kingdom of Heaven, which his Saviour had purchased for him by His own death. It *was* "all peace" with him now.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### WHAT HAPPENED ON CHRISTMAS-EVE.

WE have only one more scene to relate about the children of Oakford Farm, and that took place when the summer was past, when the autumn had changed the color of the leaves, and the winter winds had driven them from the trees.

It was Christmas-eve; a clear, keen, frosty night. Hundreds of stars twinkled in the dark blue sky, and the moon was pouring its soft silver flood of light down upon the peaceful village, the old grey church, and the quiet graves around it. Especially, its ray seemed to fall upon a simple headstone, on which was inscribed

SACRED TO THE MEMORY

OF

ALFRED WILSON,

WHO DIED MAY 14TH, 18—.

AGED 14.

'He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be My son."—REV. xxi. 7.

It was here the cripple slept; but his happy spirit was away with the Saviour who had loved him, and through whom he had become "more than conqueror" in the short hard battle of his life.

But the quiet of the scene was broken by one figure who was kneeling by the grave, with his head bent upon the stone, and deep sobs coming from him every moment. It was a stranger who was passing through the churchyard, on his way to the village, and who had suddenly been arrested by seeing the moonlight falling upon the tombstone, making every word of that short inscription stand out in startling clearness.

The young man—for he *was* young in spite of his haggard face and the deep lines of care and want upon his forehead—started as he saw the words, and then knelt down by the little grassy mound and read them again and again. Here the tears came to his eyes, and he hid his face, sobbing like a child. Who was he? and what was the dead boy to him?

After a while he rose, and took his way up the hill in the direction of the farm. When he reached it he paused, and looked round stealthily, as if fearing to be noticed; but no one was near, and he gazed in at the window of the little parlor. Why did

he start back at the sight of Farmer Lewis and his wife sitting by the bright fire? Why did he raise his hand to his head and give that groan of pain as he turned away? In another moment he had come to the door, and rosy Kate had answered to his timid trembling knock.

"Does Farmer Heathfield live here?" he asked, in low hoarse tones.

"No; he lives at the Red Cottage down below the hill," replied the girl a little frightened; and then she shut the door hastily, for fear he should be a tramp, or a beggar, that wanted to get into the house.

The lad turned away and wandered down the road in the direction of the Red Cottage; his clothing was torn and ragged, his feet bare and bleeding with the roughness of the frosty road, but still he went restlessly on, as if in search of some one. When he had reached the farmer's abode he again paused, and again looked in with an eager terrified gaze through the window.

They were all there; he could see them through the opening of the curtain drawn round the fire; the farmer and his wife grown older, but still well; George in his livery; Rhoda, with her sweet face full of Christmas joy; Mary at her work, with a pleasant smile on her lips. And who was he that stood

outside shivering and trembling in the cold, afraid to knock, afraid to enter, an outcast and a wanderer from his father's home? It was Edwin, the runaway boy. How long he might have stood there, with his face pressed against the glass, and his heart beating in that wild tremor of hope and fear, no one knows, had not Rhoda stepped to the door with George, who was going away. The brother and sister stood for some moments with the door closed behind them, exchanging good-nights, and talking about the beauty of the moonlit scene; and then with a sudden start, Rhoda laid her hand fearfully on George's arm: "Look! George, look; what is that moving by the window? Surely 'tis a man?"

"Nonsense, you little silly thing! There's nothing there; it's only a tree waving in the wind." For Edwin had shrunk away into the shadow of a large bush of holly, and was now completely hidden.

"It's been a nice Christmas-eve, George; and you'll come and dine to-morrow, that we may be all together."

"Not all together, Rhoda dear," said George, quietly. "There's always a blank to me, when I come home."

"Poor Edwin? Oh! George, I do feel certain that God will bring him back some day."

"I always miss him most at Christmas-time," said George, with a sigh.

"*Do you?*" said a deep hoarse voice close to their side; and in another moment Edwin stood before them. Rhoda greeted him with a cry of delight as she flung her arms around his neck and welcomed him home. And then she was for running into the house directly to tell the good news, but George held her back, and said:

"Rhoda, you must be very careful: remember, father isn't strong; and it might make him angry," he added in a low tone, which Edwin could not hear.

"Oh! he could not turn him away to-night —Christmas-eve? Let me go, George. I *will* try what I can do." And she wrenched herself from his grasp.

"Father," she said in a low, smothered voice, as she crept up close to him, "it's Christmas-time."

"Yes, lass, I know it."

"A time of peace and good-will," she added slowly.

"Yes, child, and of more than that," said the old man, smiling.

"Do you remember what Mr. Lester said last Sunday about God's love, 'in devising means that His banished be not expelled from Him,' and that for *this* He sent

His Son into the world at Christmas-tide?"

"Yes, I remember it; and it makes me love Christmas to think of it."

Then Rhoda buried her face on his shoulder, and faltered out:

"Father, won't *you* forgive, as God has forgiven us? Edwin is here."

A wondering change passed over the old man's face; then tears rose to his eyes, and he stretched out his trembling hands, saying eagerly, "Mother! mother! our boy's come back; our son, our first-born!" But before he could add more, Edwin was kneeling by his side, crying, "Oh! father, forgive me; send me away if you like, but forgive me first!"

Need we tell how the father raised his boy and comforted him? Edwin was forgiven: and thus the Christmas-eve closed in peacefully at the Red Cottage.

We must leave our friends at Oakford now. We cannot stay to describe the sufferings and adventures through which poor Edwin had passed, in his sea-faring life: the discipline of those years of hardship had taught him many a useful lesson, and he had left the sins and follies of his boyhood behind him, determined from henceforth, with God's help, to lead a new life.

Mr. Lester found some employment for him, and he became the support and comfort of his parents' declining years; when George was engaged in his master's service; when Mary had set up as a dressmaker in Grindon; and when Rhoda was married to Frank Lewis, and had gone back to live the rest of her happy, hopeful life at Oakford Farm.